

A NICHOLAS COLT THRILLER

A movie poster for the film 'Colt'. The background is a dark, atmospheric tunnel with a person's silhouette in the distance, illuminated by a series of lights along the wall. The title 'COLT' is prominently displayed in large, metallic, textured letters in the center. Above the title, the text 'A NICHOLAS COLT THRILLER' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. Below the title, the name 'JUDE HARDIN' is written in a similar white, sans-serif font.

COLT

JUDE HARDIN

COLT

Jude Hardin

About COLT

October 21: just an ordinary day, unless you're a former rock star...

The sole survivor of a plane crash...

A private investigator working out of a camper...

For Nicholas Colt, October 21 is an unlucky day. A day for nightmares. It always has been, and this year is no exception.

Someone is brutally murdering the offspring of an anonymous sperm donor, and Colt's missing client is next on the list. With less than four days to find the young man—and, with a pair of drug-addicted study partners, a violent motorcycle gang, a stalker ex-girlfriend, and a host of other obstacles standing in his way—Colt faces the most challenging and deadly case of his life.

Table of Contents

PROLOGUE	
CHAPTER ONE	
CHAPTER TWO	
CHAPTER THREE	
CHAPTER FOUR	
CHAPTER FIVE	
CHAPTER SIX	
CHAPTER SEVEN	
CHAPTER EIGHT	
CHAPTER NINE	
CHAPTER TEN	
CHAPTER ELEVEN	
CHAPTER TWELVE	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	
CHAPTER NINETEEN	
CHAPTER TWENTY	
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN	
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT	
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE	
Excerpt: Lady 52	

PROLOGUE

A few days after everything went down, one of the county deputies filled me in on some of the details over a beer at Kelly's Pool Hall. He said that after several hours of interrogation at the hospital, the detectives working the case had finally managed to get a written confession. It went something like this: *I didn't really want to do it. It was like I had to, you know? Especially after I drove down there and nabbed her. I didn't have much of a choice after that. I couldn't just let her go. She begged me, and she promised not to tell anyone, but you can't trust someone under those circumstances. She would have said anything to save her own skin.*

Anyway, I'd been following her around for a while, and I waited for the right time to drop something into her drink at a bar. It was a couple of Rohypnol tablets, what they call roofies. You know, the date rape drug. Not that I planned on having sex with her or anything like that. I don't roll that way. It was just to knock her out for a while, make her helpless until I could tie her up and put her in the trunk of the car I'd rented. Once I had her in the car, it was just a matter of working up the nerve. And it wasn't easy, I can tell you that. Like I said, I really didn't want to do it. But I had to.

I wanted it to be something pretty dramatic, so it would make the papers and all. I bought a nice sturdy length of rope, took it to my room and learned how to tie a noose. I looked it up on the Internet. It took me a while to learn, but I finally got the hang of it (no pun intended). I'd been looking around for the perfect place, and I finally came across those train trestles. It was secluded, pretty much out in the middle of nowhere, but I knew a train would come by eventually, and I knew that the conductor—or whoever's job it is to watch the tracks—would see her and report it to the police.

I drove out there and lifted her out of the car. Luckily, she was kind of petite. She probably only weighed a hundred pounds or so. If she'd been a big girl, the trestles wouldn't have worked, because I had to carry her up a steep hill. It almost killed me as it was. If she had weighed much more, I couldn't have done it. Anyway, I lifted her out of the car and carried her up the hill and set her on the tracks. I had some duct tape over her mouth, but she was crying and making frantic noises down in her throat and begging me with her eyes.

The eyes were the worst. If I could do it over again, I would put some tape over those eyes. I still have dreams about them sometimes.

So I tied one end of the rope around the steel part of the railroad track, and I slipped the noose over her head and tightened it around her neck.

Then it was just a matter of rolling her off the bridge.

It was really quiet out there. I heard her neck snap when the rope went taut, and that was it. I climbed back down to where my car was, got in and drove away.

I drained the last of my beer, ordered another round. One for me, and one for the deputy.

Of course I didn't know any of those details on October 21.

On October 21, I was drunk and I didn't know much of anything.

CHAPTER ONE

When you're thirty thousand feet in the air, and the pilot says *we're losing engine number two*, you start thinking about what's really important in your life.

First, you think about your kid. Her name is Harmony, and she's only four months old. You've known her since the day she was born. Before that, actually, because you talked to her while she was still in the womb. You watched her being delivered. You cut the cord. You cried. She's here beside you now, in her mother's arms, resting quietly, even as the airplane plummets from the sky.

You think about your beautiful wife, Susan. About the day you met her at the show in Kingston, Jamaica, and about all the good times you've had with her since then. About the times you and she were on the covers of magazines, dressed as bride and groom.

You think about the guys in the band. You've known them since Jr. High. They're like brothers. They struggled all the way up with you, and now they're living the dream with you.

And dying with you.

The pilot aims for an open field, but comes up short. For an instant, you hear the tree branches scraping the bottom of the fuselage. Like fingernails on a chalkboard. Then you're on the ground and it's smoky and hot and you can't see.

You can't breathe.

You crawl from the wreckage. Dazed, bleeding, tears and snot dripping from your swollen face. You start searching for your loved ones, frantically shouting their names, but as the fumes from the empty fuel tanks explode skyward in a massive black and orange fireball, you realize they didn't make it out.

You realize they didn't make it out...

Those were my thoughts when October 21 rolled around again. Another year gone by, fourteen in all, and the crash still seemed like yesterday.

I sat at the cramped little galley table of my 1964 Airstream Safari travel trailer with a bottle of Old Fitzgerald and a glass, wondering why I was the only one fortunate enough to walk away. It's not fair. They were all better than me. But here I am. The lucky one, if you can call it that. I do the same thing every year. I get drunk and I think about them. And I wonder. And I cry. It's a tradition.

There were a dozen or so of my business cards stacked neatly and incongruously on the table by the salt and pepper shakers. I picked one up and looked at it: Nicholas Colt, Private Investigator. Lot 27,

Joe's Fish Camp, Lake Barkley. Hallows Cove, Florida. There was a phone number, but it wasn't in service at the moment.

Along with everything else, I wondered how I ever got to here from there.

I looked at my watch. 3:37. I knew it was p.m. because it was still light outside. I figured I would pass out around six, and tomorrow would be another day.

I was pouring myself another shot from the bottle when someone started banging on the hatch. I got up and looked out the window. There was a mirror mounted to the side of the camper, angled so I could see visitors when they came up to the door. Identification, Friend or Foe. The low tech version. This particular visitor was a man in his late teens or early twenties. He wore khaki shorts and a black polo, and there was a cell phone clipped to his belt. I figured he was about six feet tall, give or take. Medium build, dark brown hair, sunglasses. The air conditioner in my camper was a little noisy, so I hadn't heard him drive up in the fancy new car.

He was very young, and he was obviously from an affluent family. Not my typical client. In fact, he probably wasn't a client at all. He probably wanted to ask about renting a boat or something. People come to me when they can't find Joe Crawford, the man who owns the property. Joe is my landlord, and he also happens to be my best friend. I help him with security around the place, and with other little things from time to time, and he gives me a break on the rent. It's a nice arrangement, except on October twenty-first, when I'm three sheets to the wind at 3:37 in the afternoon.

I tried to ignore the young man at the door, but he kept banging. I forced myself off the bench and opened the hatch.

"Can I help you?" I said.

He looked at me. He was slow to answer.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I must have the wrong address."

"Who were you looking for?"

"A guy named Nicholas Colt. He's supposed to be some kind of private eye or something."

I wasn't in the mood for any of this.

"That's me," I said. "I'm a guy named Nicholas Colt, and I *am* some kind of private eye or something. What happened? Someone steal your skateboard?"

He smiled. Sort of. I could tell he wasn't very impressed with me, and I can't say that I blamed him. I was shirtless. My cutoff army fatigue pants were stained with fish blood, and I hadn't trimmed my hair or beard in about six months. My eyes were probably bloodshot, and I couldn't remember if I'd taken a shower that morning. Some kind of private eye indeed. I probably looked more like a gutter bum.

Despite my unprofessional appearance, he politely extended his arm and shook my hand.

“Everett Harbaugh,” he said. “I’m trying to find someone. I thought you might be able to help me.”

“You thought wrong. I’m not open for business. Not today.”

“A man named Winston Fell told my—”

“You know Winston?” I said.

“My parents do. Mr. Fell told them about you, said you’d probably be home today. I tried your phone, but I couldn’t get through.”

Winston Fell is a retired police officer, a dear old friend of mine. I call him Papa. We drink beer and go fishing sometimes. He would do anything for me, and I would do anything for him. I was a little surprised he hadn’t told me about the referral, but maybe he’d tried. My cell phone had been off all day.

“What was your name again?” I said.

“Everett Harbaugh.”

“All right. Come on in.”

He stepped up and over the threshold, out of the hot sunshine and into the cool dimness. I motioned toward the galley table, and he slid into the seat furthest from the whiskey bottle.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I said. “Are you old enough to drink?”

“I’ll be twenty in three days,” he said.

“Twenty sucks. You’re not a teenager anymore, but you’re still not allowed to drink alcohol. Not that it stops anyone, of course. You want a soda?”

“Sure.”

I poured him some semi-flat Sprite from a two-liter in the refrigerator, sat across from him and lifted my glass of bourbon.

“Cheers,” I said. “So tell me about who you’re trying to find.”

“I’m trying to find my father.”

Join the club, I thought. Mine had been missing in action since I was three. Not that I ever spent any time searching for him. He was still alive, last I heard. Maybe I would look him up sometime and see what kinds of medical conditions I needed to worry about as I rounded forty-two and headed for fifty. Then again, maybe not. Rule #8 in Nicholas Colt’s *Philosophy of Life*: Worrying about how long you’re going to live will kill you faster than anything.

I lit a cigarette.

“What happened to your dad?” I said.

“My dad’s fine. He was the one who told me.”

I was confused. “What are you talking about?” I said.

“I’m looking for a sperm donor,” he said. “Wait, that didn’t come out right. Let me start over. Last Friday, I drove home for the weekend

“Drove home from where?”

“Gainesville. UF. I’m a student there.”

It took me a second to remember what day of the week it was.

“Today’s Tuesday,” I said. “Why aren’t you at school?”

“I only have one class and a lab on Tuesdays. I’m done by eleven o’clock in the morning.”

“Okay. Go ahead.”

“So last Friday I drove home, and Dad sat me down and told me that my whole life has been a lie. He didn’t use those words, but that’s what it amounted to. Apparently he had testicular cancer when he was younger, and the radiation treatments made him sterile. Neither he nor my mom wanted kids when they first got married, but then they changed their minds. So twenty years and nine months ago, my mother climbed onto an examination table in a doctor’s office and spread her legs. The doctor did his trick with a turkey baster or whatever, and the result was me.”

I flicked an ash into the ashtray.

“And you want to find the donor?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I think everybody has a right to know where they came from,” he said. “Plus, I would like to know if I have any brothers or sisters out there. You know, half-siblings. I was raised an only child, but I’ve always felt like there are others. It’s hard to explain.”

“Do you know the name of the clinic where your mother was inseminated?”

“Yes,” he said. “Klein Fertility in Orange Park. It’s still there.”

“And do you know the donor number?”

“One seventy-three.”

I stubbed my cigarette out and took a drink of bourbon.

“There’s a website called the Sibling Boards,” I said. “Started back in two thousand and one, I think. All you have to do is—”

“I tried that,” Everett said. “There weren’t any matches. I went ahead and registered, in case something comes up, but some of those people have been waiting for years. I want to know now.”

“That’s a tough nut to crack. If a donor doesn’t want to be found, then it’s going to be really hard to find him. That’s pretty much the arrangement, you know? The donor goes into a room by himself and looks at a dirty magazine for a while, comes out and hands a specimen cup to a nurse. He gets paid for his troubles, and that’s it. All the paperwork promises anonymity.”

“I know all that. But there must be a way.”

“Not really,” I said. “Not legally, anyway.”

“My parents are very wealthy, Mr. Colt. And they’re supporting my decision to do this. I’ll pay you for your time. I’ll pay double your normal rate.”

That made my ears perk up. I was behind on everything, and the 750ml bottle of Old Fitzgerald in front of me wasn’t going to last forever.

And I wasn’t above fudging on the law from time to time, especially when it was for a good cause. This didn’t really qualify, but doubling my normal rate went a long way too.

“I’ll need some money up front,” I said.

“Not a problem.”

“I’ll need to get some more information from you.”

“Okay.”

I stood up and walked over to the living room and grabbed the spiral notebook I’d thrown on the sofa. I looked around for a pen or a pencil, couldn’t find one anywhere.

“Got anything to write with?” I said.

“Sure. Out in my car. I’ll be right back.”

He got up and walked outside. I opened the refrigerator, grabbed the two-liter of Sprite, poured the last of it into his glass and tossed in a couple of ice cubes. I was getting hungry, so I pulled a hot dog out of the meat tray and gobbled it cold. It was terrible, but I figured the fat would absorb some of the alcohol in my gut. I ate a couple of saltines with it and some jalapeño slices from a piece of pizza I’d been meaning to throw out. Someday, I’m going to write a cookbook: *Meals at Home in Under a Minute*. I’ll make a fortune.

I sat back down at the table, and I must have nodded off. When I opened my eyes, it was 4:26. I wasn’t sure how much time had elapsed. It could have been thirty seconds, or it could have been thirty minutes. I wasn’t sure, but it seemed long enough for Everett Harbaugh to have walked out to his car for an ink pen. Maybe he’d decided to take his business elsewhere. Maybe he’d hired me and fired me the same day.

I got up and peeked out the window. Everett’s car was still there, but I didn’t see him anywhere. I slipped into my topsiders and walked outside. Looked around. Called his name.

Somehow, my client had disappeared.

CHAPTER TWO

Everett Harbaugh owned a nice car. BMW convertible, top of the line. I tested the handle on the driver's side door. It wasn't locked. I opened it and looked inside. It smelled like leather conditioner in there, with just a hint of cologne, something expensive. There was a cellular telephone on the center console and a nylon backpack on the passenger's seat. Otherwise, the interior looked showroom new. No crumpled McDonald's bags on the floor or empty Styrofoam coffee cups on the dash.

I was no expert, but it seemed to me that Everett Harbaugh was way neater than your average twenty-year-old college student. Or your average forty-two-year-old private investigator, for that matter.

I thought about what might have happened, tried to reconstruct some things in my mind. Maybe Everett had come in and had seen me passed out at the table. Maybe he'd decided to leave me alone for a while, let me sleep it off.

I walked down to the lake, thinking he might have taken a stroll. It's what I would have done if I'd driven all the way from Gainesville to Hallows Cove and was on the fence about hiring a drunken PI.

Dylan, Joe Crawford's ten-year-old son, was down there casting from the bank. There was a yellow dog standing beside him, part lab and part something else. Bear, maybe. The dog was big and muscular, but he didn't look healthy. His ribs were showing and his hair was missing in patches.

"Who's your friend?" I said.

"This is Bud. He started sleeping on our porch the other day. Dad says I can keep him. *If* I take care of him, that is."

"You going to?"

"Yep."

"Bud looks sick," I said.

"He's going to be okay. We took him to the vet and got some medicine for him."

"Good. Hey, did you see anyone walking around down here a few minutes ago? Young guy, black polo shirt?"

"I haven't seen anybody," Dylan said. "But I just now came out."

"Did you happen to see any cars pull into my place or anything?"

"Nope."

"A lot of help *you* are," I said.

"Sorry."

"When your dad gets home, tell him I want to talk to him."

"Okay."

I walked back up the hill and sat at the picnic table outside my camper, wondering how a twenty-year-old college student just disappears into thin air. It didn't make any sense. I sat there and waited, thinking maybe he had wandered off to explore the property, thinking he would eventually find his way back, but he never did. I waited for an hour, and then I gave up.

I climbed inside and poured myself a glass of water from a jug in the refrigerator. It hit the spot. I was dehydrated from drinking whiskey all afternoon and from sitting outside and sweating. As I gulped down a second glass, it occurred to me that a young man like Everett Harbaugh probably wouldn't go for a hike without his cell phone.

Somehow, in the early part of the twenty-first century, it had become mandatory to be accessible to your friends and family twenty-four hours a day. I hated it. In fact, I refused to participate. I used my cell for business, and that was it. But I knew how kids were, even kids as young as Dylan. They loved their phones. They didn't go anywhere without them.

So that was my first hint that something might be seriously wrong. I didn't want to think the worst, but it was hard not to. For one thing, the twenty-first of October had never been a lucky day for me, even before the jet went down. It was the day my mother wrapped her Ford Fairlane around an oak tree. I was five years old at the time, and it broke my heart. I felt cheated. Robbed. And I had been. We both had been.

The car crash and the plane crash were the two biggies, but through the years other unpleasant things have happened to me on the twenty-first of October. One year, in a bar down in New Orleans, in the men's room, someone picked my pocket and stole my wallet. I lost two hundred dollars in cash, and it took me a month to get my driver's license and PI license and all the credit cards replaced. It was a major hassle. They ended up arresting the guy, though. They caught him trying to use one of my cards at a filling station in Baton Rouge. I know his name, and I know what he looks like. If I ever see him on the street, he's in for a world of hurt.

I don't consider myself superstitious, but I generally don't go anywhere or do anything on October 21. I stay home and get drunk until it's over. Maybe some of my bad luck had rubbed off on Everett Harbaugh. I hoped not, but I couldn't help but worry.

I decided to call Winston Fell and try to get in touch with the young man's parents. I could have gone back out to the BMW and looked for the number in Everett's cell phone, but I didn't want to touch anything that belonged to him. I had a feeling it all might be evidence soon.

Winston answered on the second ring.

"Hey, Papa," I said.

"Hey, Nicholas. How's it going?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid."

There was a brief pause. Winston knew what day it was.

"You been drinking?" he said.

"Yeah. A little bit."

"So what's going on?"

I cleared my throat. "You know some people named Harbaugh?" I said.

"Yeah, they go to my church. Which means I see them two or three times a year. Bradley called me the other day and told me his son Avery might need some help finding someone. I told him about you."

"Everett," I said.

"Huh?"

"The son's name is Everett."

"Oh. I knew it was something like that."

"He came to see me today," I said. "But then he disappeared."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he disappeared."

I explained everything that had happened, from the time Everett knocked on my door to the time I noticed he was missing.

"Weird," Papa said.

"Yeah. He's been gone for well over an hour, and I'm starting to think something really bad might have happened."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," I said. "At first I thought he might have gone for a walk and sprained an ankle or something. But he's been gone too long. And he left his cell phone in his car. Kids his age just don't do that."

"Maybe this one does."

"I don't think so. It was clipped to his belt when he first came over. Why would he have taken it off to go for a walk?"

"You have a point," Papa said. "So what are you thinking?"

"His parents are rich, right?"

"They're loaded. Bradley's an attorney, and Jill's maiden name was Drake."

I thought about that for a second.

"Drake?" I said. I didn't understand the significance.

"Yeah. As in Drake Foods. Jill inherited the business when her mother died a couple of years ago. So yes, the Harbaughs are definitely what you would call rich."

"And rich kids get kidnapped sometimes," I said.

"Huh?"

"I know. It sounds like I'm jumping to conclusions, right?"

"A little bit. It's just as likely that he jumped in the lake and

drowned. And how likely is *that*? Come on, Nicholas. How long has he been gone? A couple of hours? He might have hopped in a car with a friend or something. Or maybe he met a girl down by the lake while you were taking your little nap. A young man that age, you never know. I'm sure he'll show up in a little while."

"Maybe," I said. "Anyway, I was wondering if you could give me his parents' phone number. Just in case I need to call them."

"Sure. Hold on while I get my address book."

I stared at the whiskey bottle on the table, thought about it, decided to leave it alone. A few seconds later, Winston came back on and gave me the Harbaugh's home phone number.

"Thanks, Papa," I said.

"Sure. Feel like doing a little fishing sometime this week? I have some artificial baits I want you to try. I caught a six-pounder last time I went out."

"Maybe. I'll give you a call."

We disconnected. I walked back outside and took one last look around. The sun was setting over the lake in a brilliant display of orange and gold and turquoise, and the crickets had started singing already. In most parts of the country the nights were getting cooler, but it was still summer in northeast Florida. Highs in the mid to upper eighties, thunderstorms almost every afternoon. The suburban types would be mowing their lawns for another month or so.

I walked behind the camper and into the woods a few feet, and I walked back down the hill to the water. No sign of Everett Harbaugh. Or anyone else, for that matter. The lake usually stays pretty deserted during the week, which makes it nice for me and the other permanent residents. All three of us.

By the time I made it back to my Airstream, it was almost dark. I went inside and opened up my laptop and did a little research on the Harbaughs. They were loaded, just as Papa had said, and apparently they weren't getting along very well. Jill had filed for divorce back in August.

I stood by the stove and stared out the window. For some reason, every time I looked at that black BMW convertible in my driveway, I wanted to tack *the third* onto the end of Everett's name. That's what a rich kid like him would have been called in the movies. Everett Harbaugh III. But this was real life, and his daddy's name was Bradley, and Bradley answered the phone when I called at 6:33.

"My name is Nicholas Colt," I said. "Your son came to see me earlier, and—"

"He said he was going to. He was pretty upset when he found out about the sperm bank thing. I always wanted to tell him, but for years his mother wouldn't let me. I figured it was time, and I decided that I

didn't need her permission anymore."

"Right. The thing is, he went outside to get something out of his car a while ago, and now I can't find him anywhere."

There was a pause.

"What are you saying?" Harbaugh said.

"His car is still here, but he isn't. He's been gone a couple of hours."

"That's not like Everett. He's a very responsible young man. He wouldn't just go off like that. No, something's definitely wrong."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said.

"Have you called the police yet?"

"I thought I would call you first. He's an adult, so the police won't file a missing person's report until twenty-four hours have passed."

"He might be dead by then. Where do you live?"

"Hallows Cove. Lake Barkley."

"I'll be there in an hour."

"Is anyone else there at the house?" I said.

"No. My wife and I are separated. Why?"

"I just think someone should be there to answer the phone if it rings."

He took a few seconds to think about that. "You mean if the kidnappers call and ask for a ransom? Is that what you're saying?"

"I think it's worth considering at this point. Then again, I might be overreacting. I talked to our friend Winston a while ago, and he thinks it's way too soon to start worrying. He thought Everett might have taken off with a girl or something."

"No, he wouldn't have done anything like that," Harbaugh said.

"I didn't think so. And really, there aren't many people hanging around the lake on a Tuesday anyway. That's another thing that might make it difficult. If someone did snatch him, there probably weren't any witnesses."

"I'm going to call the police. I know they won't file a report this soon, but I'm going to call them anyway. Get the ball rolling. I can't just sit around doing nothing, you know?"

"I know."

"I'm a criminal defense attorney, Mr. Colt, and I know how these things usually go. Tomorrow, the police will conduct a search around the lake property there, and they'll file all the proper paperwork and everything, and there might be some local news reports for a couple of days, and then—unless there's an actual ransom call or some other compelling evidence that a kidnapping has occurred—everyone will forget about it. I also know that Everett might be dead as we speak, and that the police might find his body on their initial search. But until I know otherwise, I'm going to assume my son is still alive, and I'm going to do everything I can to find him."

"I would do the same thing," I said.

"I know quite a few private investigators, Mr. Colt, but Winston Fell says you're one of the best around. I trust his judgment. Would you be interested in taking the case?"

"You want to hire me to find your son?"

"Yes. Will you do it? Are you available?"

"I'm available," I said.

"I would want you to start right away. Tonight. Can you do that?"

"Honestly—"

"Because if you can't, I'll have to find someone else. This is my son we're talking about, and I'm not going to waste any time."

I thought about it. On this day, fourteen years ago, everything that I held dear went up in a ball of flames. My wife, my daughter, all the members of my band. In the weeks that followed, I made a promise to myself, a promise to never, ever, work on the twenty-first of October again. I vowed to keep it as a day of remembrance. A day of mourning. A day to crack the seal on something strong and drown my sorrows in it.

But maybe the time had come to break that vow.

Bradley Harbaugh was hurting. I could hear it in his voice. Maybe it was time for me to let go of the past. Just a little. Maybe it was time for me to help the man on the other end of the phone, and allow the ones no longer here to rest in peace. It tore at my gut, but I knew it was the right thing to do.

"I can start tonight," I said. "I'm on board. A hundred percent."

"Good. And there's something else I need to tell you. My firm was recently involved in a fairly high-profile criminal case involving a gang member. The verdict didn't go his way, and some of his associates are upset about it. We're assuming it's them, anyway. We've been getting some pretty nasty anonymous emails containing all kinds of threats. We've reported it to the police, but you know how that goes. Anyway, I wouldn't be surprised if this gang was involved in Everett's disappearance."

"What's the name of the gang?" I said.

"The Five Points Posse. It's a motorcycle club in Jacksonville. You've heard of them?"

"Yeah. I've heard of them. I've even talked to a few of them through the years. What was the member you represented charged with?"

"Murder," he said.

"All right. I'll check them out. I'm going to need some money up front, for expenses and all."

"I can overnight you a check tomorrow. It'll get there Thursday. Is that soon enough?"

"That'll be fine," I said.

We discussed my rate and some other particulars, and I told him to call me right away if he heard from Everett or someone claiming to have kidnapped him. By the time we hung up, I was calling him Bradley and he was calling me Nicholas.

I put the bourbon away, took a cold shower, brewed a pot of coffee, and went to work.

CHAPTER THREE

I keep a first-aid kit in one of the compartments under my bed. I pulled the kit out and grabbed a pair of surgical gloves and walked outside to Everett's car.

I opened the door. I had a flashlight with me, but I didn't need it. The dome light was bright enough to see what I needed to see. The keys were in the ignition. I hadn't noticed that before. It appeared that Everett had climbed into the car with the intention of going somewhere. He'd probably seen me asleep at the table and had decided to bail on me. Almost anyone would have, when I thought about it. Who wants to hire a drunk?

Everett had been sitting in his car, ready to start the engine and take off. Then, something had prevented that from happening. A second car must have pulled into the driveway.

I call it a driveway. It's really just a rut worn into the scrub grass from frequent use. A second car must have pulled up, and Everett must have gotten into that car.

There was little doubt in my mind now that Everett Harbaugh had been abducted. If he'd gone somewhere voluntarily, he would have taken his keys and his cell phone with him.

And his wallet. It was in the glove compartment.

I picked Everett's backpack up and set it on the floorboard. I pulled the wallet out of the glove box and went through it, carefully placing the items on the passenger's seat in the order I'd removed them. There was some cash in the money slot, seventy-four dollars, along with a bunch of receipts from places like Best Buy and Walmart and Game Stop. Typical places for kids to hang out and spend their money these days, I supposed. Or to just hang out. The letters SB, an email address, and a string of seemingly random numbers and letters were written on the back of a receipt from a popular clothing store. I figured SB stood for Sibling Boards, and the rest was a user name and password for Everett to log onto the site.

I tucked the receipt into my shirt pocket, thinking it might be useful to check the site and see if Everett had gotten any hits yet. He said he hadn't, but sometimes it takes a while for anything to show up. Another receipt had come from the University of Florida bookstore. Nine hundred sixty-five dollars and forty-three cents. A few textbooks and a bottle of spring water had cost Everett nearly a grand. No wonder a lot of kids end up in debt after college. Everything associated with going to school is outrageously priced. It's practically criminal, if you ask me. Education should be free for anyone who

wants it. And, as soon as I'm elected king of the world, I'm going to make it a rule.

Debt was never going to be an issue for Everett Harbaugh, but he obviously had his own problems. He had been taken against his will. I was almost sure of that now. He'd been taken, but the reason for the abduction was still a mystery, as was the person behind it. Maybe the Five Points Posse was involved. I would certainly check them out, although kidnapping wasn't their style. They usually took care of their enemies with a knife across the throat or a bullet to the back of the brain.

I went through the rest of Everett's wallet. There was a driver's license, a University of Florida student identification card, a AAA card, and some insurance cards. In the secret compartment behind the photograph sleeves, there was a condom and a credit card.

I was putting everything back into the wallet when the cell phone on the center console started buzzing. It was set on vibrate. It startled me. I almost had an accident right there on Everett's nice leather seats.

I picked the phone up and looked at it. The caller ID said Albert. I debated for a second, and then I decided to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Everett?"

It wasn't Albert. It was a girl.

"Yeah," I said. "Who's this?"

"It's me. Why are you whispering?"

"I really can't say."

"Is someone with you?" she said. "Is it her? I am so going to kill you. I thought you said it was over."

"It is," I said, still whispering. "I'm alone. Where's Albert?"

"He's here. Why don't you come on over? We have a surprise for you."

"What kind of surprise?"

"The good kind," she said. "The Colombian kind."

"Let me talk to Albert," I said.

"He's taking a dump. Just come on over, okay?"

She hung up.

I scrolled through Everett's contact list, which was extensive. Albert's number was at the very top. Albert was into something from Colombia, which meant Everett was into something from Colombia, and I had a feeling it wasn't coffee or colorful wall hangings. Everett might have been a responsible young man, but he was getting high on something with his friends.

Not that there was anything unusual about that. When I was twenty, everyone I knew was smoking or snorting or popping or shooting up

or all of the above. Of course I was traveling with the band by that time. This was before our chartered jet days. We were burning up the interstate in a bread truck, using crates filled with stage lights for a backseat. We didn't have much money. Some nights, the five of us would share a pound of bologna and a loaf of white bread for dinner. And some peanut butter, if we were lucky, smeared on crackers stolen from Wendy's salad bar. We never had much cash, but we somehow managed to get stoned every night after the show. So it really didn't surprise me that Everett was doing drugs, or that his father didn't know about it. I figured it was worth checking into, though. And, if he was dealing, that was a different story altogether. That could explain everything.

I reassembled the wallet and shoved it back into the glove box. Everything except the student ID. I kept that. I slid the cell phone into my pocket and grabbed a pen from Everett's backpack, planning to write down every name and number on his contact list. I wanted to get the information before the cops came. Once they had the phone in their possession, I would never see it again.

I climbed out of the BMW and shut the door. Before I made it back inside the camper, I heard footsteps coming up behind me. I turned. It was Joe Crawford. My landlord. My best friend since sixth grade. He was still in his work clothes. Tan suit, white shirt, striped tie, real shoes. In addition to owning and operating the fish camp, he dabbled in international real estate. Like Everett Harbaugh, debt was never going to be one of his problems.

"Hey, Joe," I said.

"Hey. Dylan said you wanted to talk to me."

"Yeah. I just wanted you to know I might be a little late with this month's rent."

He laughed. "It's the twenty-first," he said. "You're already three weeks late. So what else is new?"

I felt embarrassed. Joe and I are friends, but business is business. I don't like to get behind on my financial responsibilities. Especially when a friend is involved.

"It's been a little slow," I said. "But I have a job. I should be getting some money soon."

"Shut up, man. You know I'm not worried about it. Does your job have anything to do with that fancy new convertible?"

"Actually, it does."

I lit a cigarette and told him what had happened.

"That's really strange," he said. "I guess we can expect the police to be swarming the place any time now."

"I don't know about swarming, but they'll be here. The kid's father said he was going to call them tonight. I'm trying to get as much

information as I can before they show up.”

“All right. Well, I’ll let you get to it, Nicholas. Jen’s frying some pork chops and baking some biscuits if you want to come over for dinner.”

“Thanks,” I said. “But I still have quite a bit of work to do.”

“Well, there’s plenty, and you know you’re always welcome.”

“Thanks.”

He gave me a half salute, turned and walked away with his hands in his pockets. I crushed my cigarette into the sand with the toe of my shoe, went inside and set my spiral notebook and Everett’s pen and cell phone on the table. I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down and started jotting down the names and numbers from his contact list. While I was at it, I wrote my cell phone number on the backs of a few business cards and slid the cards into my wallet. By the time I finished, it was almost ten o’clock.

I figured Albert and his girlfriend would be toasted by then, and I figured it wouldn’t hurt to put a little fear into them.

I punched in Albert’s number. A male voice answered.

“Dude, where are you?” he said.

“I’m not a dude. I’m a private investigator.”

He laughed. “Come on, Everett. Stop screwing around, man. Where are you? I thought you were coming over.”

“Everett was kidnapped,” I said. “His father hired me to find him. My name’s Nicholas Colt.”

“Kidnapped. Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I’m serious. I was the one who answered earlier when your girlfriend called.”

“She’s not my girlfriend, dude. She’s just a girl, you know? She said she talked to Everett.”

“She didn’t. It was me. So you guys having a little party tonight?”

“We’re studying. The three of us have calculus tomorrow. We get together every Tuesday night and—”

“So let me get this straight. If I send some cops over with a dog, they’re not going to find anything. Right?”

He took a second to consider that.

“What do you want?” he said, his tone not quite as arrogant now.

“A little respect, and a few minutes of your time. That’s all.”

“Okay.”

“What kinds of drugs are you using?” I said.

“Just weed, man.”

“Cut the *man* and the *dude* and all that. You can call me Mr. Colt. Or sir.”

“Okay.”

“How much marijuana do you have at your house right now?”

"We had two joints earlier," he said. "Now we have two roaches."

"Have you ever dealt the stuff?"

"No, never."

"What about Everett?"

"Not that I know of."

"Good. You're doing fine, Albert. Just a couple of more questions, and I'll let you get back to your studies. The young lady I talked to earlier implied that Everett might have recently broke up with a girlfriend. You know anything about that?"

"I'm starting to feel like some kind of informant," he said. "Shouldn't I be getting paid for this?"

"You are getting paid, Albert. In exchange for a little information, I'm going to allow you to go about your business without a vice cop looking over your shoulder twenty four hours a day. How does that sound? Is that enough payment for you?"

"Her name's Shelby Spelling," he said. "Everett dumped her a few weeks ago. She's a total psych job if you ask me. After he broke up with her, she started calling him about a thousand times a day, and she even showed up at his room a few times. Totally stalking him. I think he finally blocked her number on his phone, and he called campus security the last time she came to the fraternity house."

"Which fraternity?" I said.

"Phi Epsilon Alpha Kappa. They call it PEAK for short. Everett pledged when he was a freshman, but he just started living there this year."

"All right. I appreciate your help, Albert. I'll give you a call if I think of anything else. Try not to smoke too much dope, okay? I really don't think it's going to do anything for your math skills."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said.

I checked the call records on Everett's phone, but he must have deleted everything before he came to my place. The calls to and from Albert were there, but that was it.

I took the phone back out to the BMW and placed it on the center console where I'd found it. I went ahead and took the keys out of the ignition and locked the door and set the alarm. If the cops had a problem with that, then so be it. We don't usually have to worry about any sort of theft around the lake, but then we don't usually have to worry about kidnappers either. Better to be safe than sorry.

Next to Everett's car, my 1996 GMC Jimmy looked like a piece of junk. But it wasn't. It was a good truck. The silver paint had started to peel a little, and the tint on the windows had started to bubble a little, and one of the hubcaps was missing, but it was paid for and it ran like a top. The options included four-wheel drive, a 4.3 liter Vortec engine, a five speed transmission, a Smith and Wesson .38 and a sawed-off

twelve gauge pump.

When I put the pedal to the metal, my truck would flat get up and go. I'd bought it new, and I'd put over a hundred thousand miles on it. I considered it my partner, my sidekick.

I even talked to it sometimes.

"Hello, Jimmy," I said. "Let's go for a ride."

I climbed in and fired it up and headed for Five Points in Jacksonville.

CHAPTER FOUR

There was a blues club on Park Street called Yesterday's. I'd been there plenty of times. I'd even played some music there on occasion, back when I was still doing that kind of thing. There was a well-lit room in front where customers could play nine ball by the hour, and a darker room in back with a bar and some bistro tables and a large concert stage.

I slid the holstered .38 onto my belt, concealed it with the tails of my Hawaiian shirt. I walked in and looked around. It was slow, even for a Tuesday. A man and a woman stood by one of the pool tables with sticks in their hands, but they weren't playing a game. Not at the moment, anyway. They were just standing there drinking beer and talking. The man tipped his Jacksonville Jaguars ball cap as I sauntered by.

I walked back to the main nightclub and took a seat at the bar. I counted five other customers, and it didn't take me long to figure out that four of them were in the band. They must have been on break. They were drinking shots and laughing and having a good time. I'd been there. It's never much fun to play to an empty room, but you do whatever you can to make the best of it. Alcohol helps.

There was a cocktail waitress sitting alone at one of the tables. She was skinny and blond and she had dark circles under her eyes. She looked bored. She took a drag from her cigarette and then put it out in an ashtray that needed to be emptied.

The bartender wore tight black shorts and a T-shirt cut to expose the shiny gold stud in her belly button. Mid-thirties, long brown hair, cute smile. Her nametag said Laurie.

I ordered a draft beer. Laurie brought it and set it on a napkin in front of me.

"Where is everybody?" I said.

"That's what I would like to know. Can't make a living like this."

I took a sip of my beer. It was cold and delicious.

"Those guys in the band?" I said, gesturing toward the cluster of tattooed fellows on the other side of the bar.

"Yeah. They'll be going back on in a minute. You should stick around. They're pretty good."

"What kind of music?"

"Rock and roll. AC/DC. Zeppelin. All kinds of stuff."

"Cool. Maybe I will stick around. You guys ever get any bikers in here anymore?"

She wiped the edge of the bar with a towel.

"Sometimes," she said. "Why? You ride?"

"Not me. Those things are dangerous. Actually, I'm trying to find someone. Guy they call Fatso."

"Never heard of him," she said.

I slid a business card and a folded twenty dollar bill across the bar in her direction.

"Now have you heard of him?" I said.

She took the twenty, bypassed the wine carafe they were using for a tip jar and stuffed it directly into the front pocket of her shorts. I figured she didn't want to have to share it with the cocktail waitress.

"What do you want to know?" she said.

"Where can I find Fatso?"

"He rides with the Posse. Those guys don't come in here anymore."

"Why not?" I said.

"Because the owner told them not to. They were causing too much trouble. Starting too many fights."

"So where do they hang out now?"

"Arenque's. You know where that is?"

"I know where it is," I said. "It's always a good idea to have a suture kit handy when you walk into that place."

"I wouldn't go there," she said. "But hey, you asked."

"So I did. Thanks for the information. I appreciate it."

I chugged the last few ounces from my beer mug, climbed off the stool and started to walk away.

"I thought you were going to stick around to hear the band," Laurie said.

"Maybe next time."

"All right. Well, don't be a stranger."

Unfortunately, a stranger was exactly what I was going to be at Arenque's Bar and Grill, and Arenque's was the kind of joint where they didn't care much for strangers. I'd only been there once, but once had been enough. It was on my *Avoid Like the Plague* list of restaurants and taverns. You know a place is bad when the ketchup stains on the bar towels aren't from ketchup.

I walked back through the billiards room and out the front door. The guy in the Jaguars hat told me to have a good one.

"I doubt it," I said. "But thanks."

My cell phone trilled as I was climbing into my truck. I shut the door and answered the call.

"This is Colt," I said.

"Hey, this is Laurie. I just wanted to tell you, I get off around two-thirty. You know, if you feel like doing something."

I looked at my watch. It was quarter past midnight.

"I have some work to do," I said. "But we'll see how it goes."

Maybe I was going to have a good one after all.

CHAPTER FIVE

My dreaded point of destination was only half a mile away. Someone had painted *BEER TACOS FAJITAS* in bold white letters on the plate glass window out front, and above that a neon sign shouted the name of the establishment in a shade of red you probably could have seen from outer space. The sign's designer had used a sombrero for the apostrophe in Arenque's. A clever touch, I thought.

The parking lot looked like a Harley-Davidson dealership. I figured there was at least a quarter million dollars' worth of chrome pipes and leather saddlebags lined up out there. The money spent on those things amazed me sometimes, because I knew for a fact that most of those guys in the Posse didn't even have jobs. Half of them still lived with their parents, and the other half sponged off of women in stable professions like teaching and nursing. For beer money, those bad little boys sold a little dope and took a little book and broke a few kneecaps for the local loan sharks.

I parked on the street, fed some coins into the meter, and walked inside.

Nobody paid any attention to me at first. It was crowded, and everyone was busy drinking and eating and throwing darts and racking pool balls and shoving quarters into video poker machines. Nothing had changed much since the last time I was there, especially the smell of the place. There were onions steaming on the flat top, chimichangas sizzling in the deep fryer, hot tamales and cold beer and lime and cilantro.

I found an open barstool and ordered a Tecaté.

"No salt," I told the bartender. "In fact, you can skip the glass altogether."

The bartender set the sweaty aluminum can in front of me, and I paid him for it. I wiped the lip of the can off with a cocktail napkin and took a drink.

"You want something to eat?" he said. "Kitchen closes in ten minutes."

"No thanks."

I spotted Fatso in the mirror behind the bar. He was sitting alone in a semicircle booth, like some kind of big shot. He'd gained some weight since the last time I'd seen him. He was enormous. Three hundred pounds or better, I guessed. He wore a white T-shirt and a leather vest and a long goatee and some gold chains. His head was shaved bald.

There was a plate of tacos in front of him and some refried beans

and a galvanized steel bucket filled with crushed ice and bottles of Carte Blanca. There were a bunch of empties on the table, as if a party had been there—one of those beer-commercial parties where everyone is drinking the same brand. I walked over and slid into the chair across from him.

“Who are you?” he said.

“Swallow your food, and I’ll tell you.”

He swallowed his food and took a long pull from the beer bottle closest to his hand.

“Who are you?” he said again.

“Did you drink all this beer yourself?”

“Listen, mother—”

“You don’t remember me?” I said.

“If I remembered you, I wouldn’t be asking.”

He reached into the bucket and pulled out another bottle, opened it and took a drink. I offered him a Marlboro and he waved it off. I lit one for myself.

“Nicholas Colt,” I said. “There was a little skirmish in a place called Kelly’s on St. Patrick’s Day a couple of years ago.”

“Now I remember. You were the guy with the Balabushka.”

“It’s a replica, but yeah, that was me.”

“I’m eating,” he said. “What do you want?”

“Everett Harbaugh.”

“Who’s that?”

“You know who it is, Fatso. Where is he?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, brother, so if you don’t mind, I’d like to get back to my—”

“Your boy Dennis Jackson went down for one-eighty-seven a few weeks ago, and the law firm you hired to represent him has been getting some threatening emails. You still don’t know what I’m talking about?”

He shook his head. “In the first place, I didn’t hire anybody to represent anybody. We’re not the mafia, man. We’re just a motorcycle club.”

His voice had risen in volume, and some hairy guys with leather hats and cue sticks and longneck beer bottles had started gathering around and listening in. I flicked my cigarette ash on the floor with my left hand. My right was under the table, wrapped around the grips of my .38.

“I own a snub-nosed revolver,” I said. “Right now, as we speak, its fat barrel is pointed between your fat legs. It might behoove you to tell your guys to back off.”

He looked at me and laughed. “You got balls,” he said.

“I do. Unfortunately, yours are going to be splattered all over the

cushion of that booth in about five seconds if you don't make these assholes go away."

He turned to the guys who'd gathered around. He seemed to be addressing one of them in particular, a guy with a beard that ended at his solar plexus.

"I got this," he said.

The mob slowly dispersed. I kept my eyes on Fatso, trying not to show my extreme sense of relief.

"Everett Harbaugh is nineteen years old," I said. "He'll be twenty on Saturday. This is what he looks like."

I handed him Everett's student ID. He took the card, examined it, and then handed it back.

"Never seen him before," he said.

"You sure about that?"

"Positive."

I handed him a business card. "If you happen to see him, I want you to give me a call. Can you do that for me?"

"Why should I?"

"The local health inspector is an old friend of mine. I would hate for him to have to come over here and shut everything down. It's such a nice place, in its own slimy way, and I know for a fact that you're running out of dives to hang out in. So, if you happen to see Everett Harbaugh, I want you to give me a call. I would consider it a personal favor."

I discreetly holstered my weapon and got up and walked away, keeping my eyes on the door until I was on the other side of it.

CHAPTER SIX

I drove back to Yesterday's, found a spot in the parking lot, and set the alarm on my phone for 2:25. I put my seat back and cracked the windows and allowed the cool breeze to flow through. The band was playing inside the club now. I listened to them as I drifted into a light sleep.

When I opened my eyes, everything was quiet except for the annoying clang of my cell phone alarm. I shut it off and punched in the number Laurie had called me from earlier.

"Hey," she said. "I was just getting ready to leave. Where are you?"

"Out in the parking lot. You want to go to Denny's and get some breakfast or something?"

"This is going to sound really forward, but I was thinking maybe we could grab a six pack and go over to my place for a while."

"It's after two o'clock," I said. "Too late to grab a six pack."

"Not if you work in a bar."

"Okay. Where do you live?"

"I'll be out in a minute, and you can follow me. It's on the Westside, off Collins Road."

"Okay."

I waited. A few minutes later, she came out carrying a brown paper grocery sack. She pointed toward her car, a white Volkswagon Beetle, and I nodded.

When we got to her apartment, she said she wanted to take a shower. I opened a beer and sat on the couch and turned on the television.

I took my gun off and shoved it behind one of the cushions. I'd meant to leave it in the truck, but I'd forgotten about it. There was nothing good on TV, so I switched it off and picked up a magazine from the end table and thumbed through it until the perfume ads started giving me a headache. I heard the water running, and then I heard it stop. Laurie came out of the bathroom wearing a long white terrycloth robe. She came over and sat beside me. Her makeup was gone, but she was the kind of woman who didn't need any. Brown hair, green eyes, and a skin tone that reminded me of the beauties who crowd the beaches in Spain and Italy. She smelled terrific.

"You want a beer?" I said.

"No."

She looked at me and smiled, and I leaned over and kissed her. Soft at first, then harder, deeper. I didn't know her. Not even a little bit. But I knew I wanted her, and I knew she wanted me. We made out on

the couch for a while, the intensity increasing with every caress, with every steamy breath, and at one point she ripped my shirt open and kissed my neck and chest and stomach. She didn't want to stop there, and I didn't want her to. She got up and led me to the bedroom, and we made wild, passionate, mind-blowing love for what seemed like hours. We fell asleep holding each other, the ceiling fan cooling our hot bodies.

When I woke up, I could see daylight through the curtains. The clock by the bed said 10:31. Laurie was lying on the other side of the mattress, turned away from me, hugging her pillow and snoring softly. I climbed out of bed and padded to the bathroom and turned the water on and took a shower. When I finished, I found a towel and dried myself and got dressed. My Hawaiian shirt was ruined. All the buttons had been torn off. Small price to pay, I thought. I'd worn a tank underneath it, so at least I wasn't walking around bare-chested.

There was a gray cat stretched out on the couch. When I reached for the half-empty beer on the end table, it sprung to the floor and darted behind the set of vertical blinds covering the door to the balcony. I carried the bottle to the kitchen, planning to pour the remaining beer into the sink.

"It's a little early to start drinking, isn't it?"

I turned and saw Laurie leaning against the wall outside the bedroom. She wore an oversize Miami Dolphins T-shirt that hung to the tops of her thighs. She was smiling.

"I think this one's flat," I said. "I was going to dump it out and get myself a fresh one."

She laughed. "How about some coffee?" she said.

"Okay."

"Do you like eggs?"

"I love eggs."

She cooked an omelet with cheese and bacon and freshly-ground black pepper and onions. We had that and some strong black coffee and buttered toast and some strawberry preserves.

"This is really good," I said.

"Glad you like it. The fruit was a gift. I wouldn't buy anything that expensive for myself. Not on what I make at Yesterday's."

"This is a nice apartment. You must do all right. Where did the cat come from?"

"You met Edgar?"

"He was on the couch when I got up. Then he ran away."

"He's shy around new people. He'll get used to you. If you ever come back, that is."

"Do you want me to?" I said.

"Only if you want to."

I nibbled the corner off a piece of toast.

"I don't even know your last name," I said.

"Day. Like Doris."

"Laurie Day. I like that. I might be persuaded to come back, if you promise to take it easy on my shirt next time."

"Sorry. I can sew the buttons back on if you like."

"You know how to do that?"

"Sure."

I looked at my watch. "I need to ride down to Gainesville for a while. Maybe I could leave the shirt here."

"That's fine. What's in Gainesville?"

"A nineteen-year-old kid came to my place yesterday. He wanted me to help him find the owner of the gamete that impregnated his mother. He disappeared, right from under my nose. I think he was kidnapped."

"The owner of the gamete that impregnated his mother," Laurie echoed. "It's been a while since I took biology. You mean, like, his *father*?"

"It was a sperm bank thing. Anonymous donor. The kid wanted to know where he came from, and he wanted to know if he has any brothers and sisters running around."

"I'm not sure I would even want to know."

"Some people do, some people don't. Anyway, he lives at a fraternity house, and I thought I would poke around down there for a while and see if anyone knows anything."

"Which fraternity?"

"Phi Epsilon Alpha Kappa. They call it PEAK for short."

"I know about them," Laurie said. "I took some classes down at UF for one semester, right out of high school. As far as fraternities go, they're not very respected. From what I've heard, they take everyone else's rejects."

"I don't know anything about the fraternity, but Everett Harbaugh didn't seem like a reject to me."

"He was kidnapped?" she said. "Don't they usually call the FBI for that sort of thing?"

"They do. And that might happen later today, depending on the circumstances. In the meantime, it's just little old me. His father—the one he grew up with—hired me to work the case."

She got up and started clearing the dishes from the table.

"I'm off tonight," she said. "Give me a call if you're not too busy."

"Okay. I will."

"Promise?"

"Sure. Tell me something. Can you sing like Doris Day?"

She smiled, cleared her throat, stood there with her hands behind

her back and sang a few lines from a song I hadn't thought about in a long time.

It was good. She could really sing. It gave me chills. I kissed her goodbye at the door, wondering what I had gotten myself into.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I drove down to Melrose and took State Road 26 to Gainesville. When I got to town, I pulled into a dollar store and bought a cheap polo and a can of deodorant. I was almost out of money. I hoped the check from Bradley Harbaugh would be in my mailbox tomorrow, as promised. I needed it.

There was a bakery and a Shell station across the street from the Phi Epsilon Alpha Kappa fraternity house. I stopped for gas, took a right at the next intersection, parked in the gravel lot behind the house. It appeared to be a fairly new building, and it appeared to be well maintained. Two-story brick with dormers on the roof and a front porch you could have parked a semi on. I figured there was enough space for a couple of dozen college dorm rooms in there, maybe more.

I got out and walked around to the front of the building and mounted the steps to the porch. There was a guy sitting in a rocking chair smoking a cigarette and looking at a book called *The Trial* by an author named Franz Kafka. He looked up when I stepped onto the porch.

"Can I help you?" he said.

"Yeah. I'm looking for anyone who might be friends with Everett Harbaugh."

"I know Everett, but I haven't seen him today. I think his roommate's here if you want to talk to him."

"What's his roommate's name?" I said.

"John Patterson. He's up on the second floor, room two-twelve."

"Thanks."

I walked in and found the stairway. A guy and a girl were coming down as I was going up. They squeezed past me without saying anything. There was a shiny stainless steel mobile hanging from the ceiling. I guess it was supposed to be modern art. A dozen or so pieces, each cut in the shape of a guillotine blade, dangled from invisible wires. The entire apparatus appeared to be suspended in midair over the staircase. It was a startling illusion. Maybe *macabre* art would have been a better label for that thing. It looked downright lethal.

I made it to the second floor and walked around until I found the right room. I knocked, and a guy answered right away.

"Yes?" he said.

"Are you John Patterson?"

He nodded. "You're here about Everett, aren't you?"

"Yeah. How did you know that?"

“Is he dead?”

“Well, I hope not. But what would make you even say such a thing?”

“He didn’t come home last night. I’ve been worried about him. I tried to call him on his cell this morning, but he didn’t answer. Are you a cop?”

“May I come in?” I said.

He stepped aside, and I walked into the room. There were two beds and two desks and a small television mounted to the wall and a little refrigerator with a microwave on top of it. A pair of armoires hugged the far wall, cheap compressed wood relics that had probably been in the same spot since the day they were brought in and assembled. I knew they had been there that long because it was the kind of furniture that fell apart if you ever tried to move it. They were covered with some kind of synthetic, easy-to-clean material that was supposed to look like walnut. The room smelled like a guys’ room. There was an open bag of corn chips and a can of root beer on one of the desks.

“Are you a cop?” he said again.

“I’m a private investigator. My name’s Nicholas Colt. Everett came to my house yesterday. He was going to hire me to find someone for him. He went outside to get a pen out of his car, and he never came back. Disappeared into thin air.”

“His car’s still there?”

“Yeah. Keys, cell phone, everything. Mind if I have a seat?”

“No, go ahead.”

I sat at one of the desks. The one without the snacks. There was a leather blotter and an ink well and some other knickknacks from a bygone era, including a letter opener with a shiny gold blade and a white handle.

“This your stuff?” I said.

“Yeah. My mom made me bring all that crap. It belonged to her grandfather when he went to school here, like back in the thirties or something. It’s a bunch of junk as far as I’m concerned.”

“I think it’s nice.”

“It’s all right, I guess.”

I decided to get right to the point.

“Was Everett into drugs?” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“I know he smokes some dope every now and then. Was he into anything harder? Coke? Meth? Heroin? Did he ever sell anything to anybody?”

“Absolutely not,” Patterson said. “Not that I know of, anyway. And I think I would have known.”

"So the two of you are pretty close?"

"We're fraternity brothers, and you can see how big this room is. It's kind of hard *not* to be close."

"I talked to some friends of Everett's last night," I said. "They told me he had recently broken up with a girlfriend."

"Shelby. She didn't take it very well."

"Does she go to school here?"

Patterson sat on his bed.

"She's not a student," he said. "She's a little older, like twenty-five I think. She's a manager at Woof-A-Burger."

"How did Everett get involved with her?"

"I don't know. I think they met at a bar. He really liked her for a while, but then she started getting weird."

"In what way?" I said.

"She would just bug him all the time. She would call a lot, and sometimes she would show up unannounced. She would even show up at his classes sometimes. And she would get really mad if he went to a party without her or something. She kept accusing him of cheating on her, but he never did. Not that I know of. I think she was obsessed with him."

"Sounds like it. You think she would have hurt Everett? Physically?"

"I wouldn't put it past her," he said. "That's what I thought when I opened the door and saw you standing there. I thought she had killed him."

"Do you have her phone number?"

"No, but it should be on Everett's cell phone, if you have that."

"I looked at his phone, and I wrote down all his contacts," I said. "But there wasn't a number for anyone named Shelby. He must have deleted it. Where's the burger place she works at?"

"Right up the road. Just take a left on College. You can't miss it."

"You think she would have followed him all the way up to Lake Barkley?" I said.

"She would have followed him all the way to China. That's what a nutjob she is. To me, if you tell a girl you don't want to see her anymore, or vice versa, then that's it. You both move on with your lives."

"I agree," I said. "That's the way it should be."

"Absolutely."

I stood and took a business card out of my wallet and handed it to him.

"I'm going to go have a talk with Shelby Spelling," I said. "I want you to give me a call if you hear from Everett, or if you think of anything else that might be pertinent to the investigation."

"I sure will," he said. "I hope you find him, Mr. Colt."

“I hope so too.”

I left John Patterson’s room and walked down the stairs and out the front door. The same guy was sitting in the same chair reading the same novel.

“Did you talk to John?” he said.

“I did. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I gestured toward his book. “Is that for a class?” I said.

“Yeah. World Lit. You don’t think I’d be reading Kafka for fun, do you?”

He laughed. I walked around to the back of the building and started my truck and headed for Woof-A-Burger.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I bought a newspaper from the rack outside the restaurant, walked in and ordered two Big Woofas and a large order of fries and a Sprite. It was a lot of food, especially after the big breakfast, but all the sex last night had given me a voracious appetite. Plus, I hadn't eaten much of anything yesterday. I took my tray to a table and sat down and looked at the newspaper while I ate. Politics, war, murder, arson. It was enough to give me a bad case of heartburn. I turned to the sports page, but the news there wasn't much better. The Marlins had lost game three of the World Series, and the Yankees were up two games to one now. Game four was this afternoon, and I thought I might like to find a place to watch it.

I already knew Shelby was there in the restaurant. I'd seen her when I first walked in. I'd seen her nametag. She'd been walking around the food prep area acting like some kind of drill sergeant, telling people to get busy. She was one of those bosses whose tires you felt like slashing by the end of the shift.

I finished my lunch and dumped my trash and walked back up to the counter and asked to speak to the manager. The girl at the cash register looked worried. I figured you had to be at least sixteen-years-old to work there, but she could have passed for twelve. Her nametag said Ashley. I felt sorry for her. For some reason, people like Ashley allowed people like Shelby to intimidate them. All for a lousy minimum wage paycheck. It didn't make any sense. I would have gotten fired my first day.

But then I've been told I have a problem with authority. I've been told more than once, so it might be true.

"Was there something wrong with your food?" Ashley said.

"No. It was perfect."

She nodded. She pulled the key from her register, turned and hustled back toward the drive-thru window. A few seconds later, Shelby Spelling pushed her way through the swinging EMPLOYEES ONLY door and walked over to where I was standing.

Fair skin, strawberry blond hair.

"Is there a problem?" she said.

"Actually, there is. Can we sit down?"

"I'm really busy, sir. If there's something I can help you with—"

"Where's Everett Harbaugh?" I said.

"Sir?"

"I didn't stutter. Where's Everett?"

"Are you a police officer?"

“Private investigator.”

I handed her a business card. She took it and looked at it.

“Everett and I aren’t seeing each other anymore, so I couldn’t tell you where he is. I assume he’s in class right now, and that he’ll be back at the PEAK house later this afternoon. Otherwise, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“He’s not in class,” I said. “And he won’t be back at the fraternity house later this afternoon. Everett has been missing since yesterday. I think he might have been abducted. In fact, I’m almost sure of it. His father hired me to look for him.”

She looked genuinely surprised. Either she was the best actress in the world, or she had nothing to do with Everett’s disappearance.

A man and a woman and four children walked in and stepped up to the counter.

“Come on back to my office,” Shelby said.

She led me through the swinging door and past the walk-in refrigerator to a room you could have boxed up and hauled with a pickup truck. There was an outdated computer and printer and a small square Plexiglas window with a view of the grill area and the front counter.

I banged my knees on the front of Shelby’s desk as I wedged myself into the cramped little space and sat across from her.

“Now I know how the Apollo astronauts felt,” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind. It was before your time. Mind if I smoke?”

She pointed to a sign tacked to the wall. It was partially obscured by an employee schedule, a greasy receipt from a meat vendor, and a postcard from a dentist’s office, reminding her that she had a cleaning scheduled for Friday afternoon at four o’clock. The sign behind all that stuff said *NO SMOKING*, and there was a smoldering cigarette with a fat red circle drawn around it and a fat red line drawn through it. I pulled my fat red pack of Marlboros out of my shirt pocket and lit one anyway.

Shelby coughed. She was obviously annoyed, but she didn’t try to make me put it out. She picked up a pencil and started tapping it on the desk.

“So let me get this straight,” she said. “You think I kidnapped Everett?”

“Rumor has it that the two of you were involved in the sales and distribution of illegal substances,” I lied.

Shelby laughed. “That’s absurd. I don’t even drink alcohol. Everett might take a hit on a joint at a party sometimes, but that’s about it. We’re not selling drugs, Mr. Colt. I can promise you that.”

“Okay. Like I said, just a rumor. But a very reliable source told me

something else that was rather disturbing.”

“What’s that?”

“That you weren’t handling the breakup very well. That you were stalking Everett.”

“Another lie,” Shelby said.

“Is it? I’m sure I could gather some witnesses to corroborate what my very reliable source told me. Then I could gather some copies of Everett’s cell phone statements and—”

“All right,” she said. “Maybe I went a little overboard on the phone calls and all, but I would never do anything to intentionally hurt Everett Harbaugh. I’m in love with him.”

“You’re not in love with him,” I said. “You’re obsessed with him. There’s a big difference. You want to own Everett. You want to possess him. And if you can’t have him, nobody can. Is that how it is? Am I nailing it so far?”

She shook her head. “You’re insane,” she said. “Get out of my office before I call the cops.”

I held my cigarette over a Styrofoam coffee cup that had probably been on the desk since dawn. I flicked the filter with my thumb. The hot ash sizzled when it hit the bottom of the cup.

“I don’t think you’re going to call the cops,” I said. “I think that’s the last thing you want to do. There are laws against stalking in the state of Florida. If you call the cops, there’s a good chance you’ll be led out of this office in handcuffs. It’s no fun to be arrested, Shelby. It’s a hassle. It’ll be in the newspaper, so all your friends and family members will get to see what a bad girl you’ve been. And, when word gets around, I’m sure the owner of this fine establishment you work for won’t be very happy to hear about it either. So go ahead and call. I dare you.”

She started to reach for the phone, but then thought better of it. She laced her hands together and held them in front of her.

“What do you want from me?” she said.

“I know you were following Everett around, even before he broke up with you. You couldn’t help yourself. You had to know where he was and who he was with and what he was doing every minute of every day. I want you to write out a list of all those places you followed him to. I want to know every location he’s been to since the two of you started dating. I want to know where he hangs out to drink with his buddies, and I want to know which dry cleaner he goes to. I want to know where he buys gasoline for his car. His favorite pizza joint. Where he studies. Where he goes when he wants to be alone with his thoughts. Everything. How about it, Shelby? Can you do that for me? Can you make a list?”

“It’ll take a while,” she said. “But I guess I could do that.”

“Good. I’m going to drive around and find a place to watch the baseball game. I’ll be back here at seven-thirty this evening. That should give you plenty of time. Okay?”

She looked deflated and defeated, which was exactly the way I wanted her to look.

“Okay,” she said.

“Also, I accidentally dribbled some ketchup and Big Woofa sauce on the table where I was eating. I want you to go out there and wipe it up.”

“I’ll get someone to take care of it.”

“No,” I said. “I want *you* to go out there and wipe it up.”

“All right.”

I dropped my cigarette into the empty Styrofoam cup, opened the door and walked away. On the way out, I stopped by the table where I’d eaten and grabbed my newspaper. I still hadn’t read the funnies.

CHAPTER NINE

I'd been successful in bullying the bully, and I felt good about that.

I chose a direction on College Avenue and stopped at the first bar I saw. I walked inside and ordered a beer. The game hadn't started yet, so I walked over to the pool tables and paid for an hour and racked a set of balls. I rolled a few cue sticks on the table, finally found one that wasn't warped, and started hitting balls into pockets.

When I play tournaments, or with Joe Crawford at Kelly's on Thursday nights, I use my own stick, a very expensive Balabushka replica. It was a gift from Papa Fell, and it's one of my most prized possessions. I don't usually leave it in my Jimmy, so I didn't have it with me. Still, it only took me about three minutes to knock all the balls in. I was pulling them out of the pockets and loading them into the rack again when a guy walked up and asked me if I wanted to shoot a game of nine ball. He was a young guy, probably a college student. He wore jeans and a T-shirt and a pair of diamond earrings, and he'd brought his own cue stick into the bar. He wanted to play for ten dollars a game.

I'd counted the money in my wallet when I paid for the table. Forty-three dollars. My life's savings.

"All right," I said. "Since I paid for the table, mind if I break first?"

"Go ahead."

Forty-five minutes later, he loaded his cue into its leather-covered carrying case and exited the bar. He didn't say anything. He just walked away. I'd beat him out of ninety bucks on his regular table, and I guess he was embarrassed about it.

I walked over to the bar and found a stool and sat down and watched the fourth game of the World Series. I drank a few beers and ate a basket of jalapeño poppers and some fried oysters. The Marlins were up three to one, but New York scored two runs in the top of the ninth, sending the game into extra innings. Florida ended up winning in the bottom of the twelfth. Now the series was tied at two games apiece.

I looked at my watch. It was a few minutes past eight o'clock.

I paid my tab and left the bar and drove back to Woof-A-Burger. I was afraid Shelby Spelling might have left for home already, but she was still there. She invited me back to her office again.

"I put your list together," she said. "Everything I could think of."

"Great."

I stood there waiting for her to hand it to me.

"There's only one problem," she said. "My printer quit working a

while ago. I'll have to email the list to you, if that's all right."

"I guess it'll have to be all right," I said.

I told her my email address.

"I got a phone call from a friend a couple of hours ago," she said. "It was on television, on the news. About Everett. His parents reported him missing earlier this afternoon. The police aren't calling it a kidnapping yet. They're just saying that he disappeared."

"They don't know everything I know. He left his wallet and his cell phone and everything. He left his keys in his car. He was either kidnapped, or he was murdered. Those are the only two possibilities, as far as I'm concerned. Until they find a body, I'm going to assume he's still alive."

Shelby lowered herself into the chair behind her desk. I sat across from her again and banged my knees again.

"I guess the police will come and talk to me eventually," she said.

"You can count on it."

"I just want you to know that I didn't have anything to do with this. And if you find Everett, and he's still alive—"

"If I find Everett, and he's still alive, you're going to leave him alone. Understand?"

She nodded. "Okay. I'll leave him alone."

I didn't believe her, but there was nothing left for me to say. I got up and opened the door. She started tapping something into her computer as I walked away—her email to me with the list attached, I supposed.

On the way out, I stopped at the counter and asked Ashley if Shelby had cleaned up the little mess I'd left earlier. We spoke in hushed tones, so nobody would overhear us.

"She made me do it," Ashley said.

Amazing.

"What kind of automobile does she drive?" I said.

"It's the little white car parked around back. Ford something-or-another."

"I would like an order to go," I said. "Let me get a Big Woofa with extra, extra, extra sauce. And make sure to put plenty of ketchup in the bag."

It was a childish thing to do, but it was fun.

CHAPTER TEN

I called Laurie from the highway, and she told me to come on over. It was almost eleven-thirty by the time I made it back to her apartment. She greeted me with a hug and a kiss. We stood there in the foyer and drank each other in, as though we'd been separated for months.

"How was Gainesville?" she said.

"It was okay. I talked to Everett's roommate at the fraternity house, and I talked to his ex-girlfriend. I thought Everett might have been dealing drugs, but I've pretty much ruled that out now."

"What was the girlfriend like?"

"Aggressive. A little bit nuts, I guess. But I don't think she arranged for anything bad to happen to Everett. In fact, after some coaxing, she decided it was in her best interest to cooperate with me. She's supposed to email me a list of all the places he's been over the past few weeks."

"How would she know that?"

"She was stalking him," I said. "Maybe she doesn't know every single place he's been, but I bet she knows a lot of them."

"So you're going to trace Everett's steps and hope you come up with a lead?"

"That's the idea."

"Sounds like a good one."

"We'll see. I really don't have anything else to go on at the moment."

"You were gone a long time," Laurie said. "What else did you do down there?"

"I played some pool and watched the baseball game. I made ninety dollars. And I sauced the white Fiesta."

"You did what?"

I told her about vandalizing Shelby Spelling's car. She started laughing hysterically.

"I know," I said. "It was a stupid thing to do. But there was something exhilarating about it. Something pleasantly naughty and hugely satisfying. It gave me a rush."

"No, I think it's great that you sauced the white Fiesta. I love that. It sounds like some sort of secret code phrase from an action movie or something."

"It does?"

Laurie pretended to be speaking into a walkie-talkie: "SEAL Team A, this is SEAL Team B. Do you read me? We just sauced the white Fiesta."

She started laughing again. She leaned into me, rested her head against my chest.

"I've been told I have a way with words," I said.

"You do. And you're handsome and smart and sexy. And you have an exciting job. I can't believe I'm going out with a real private investigator."

"It's not usually very exciting," I said. "And we haven't really *gone* anywhere yet."

"So maybe you can take me somewhere tomorrow with your ninety dollars."

"Where would you like to go?"

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it. Paris, maybe."

"I don't think we'll get there on ninety bucks," I said.

She reached under my shirt and gently raked my back with her fingernails.

"I guess that's true," she said. "So I'll just have to think about it some more. But right now I would like to go to the same place you took me last night."

"And where is that?"

"Somewhere exhilarating. Somewhere pleasantly naughty and hugely satisfying."

"I get it," I said. "You want me to sauce the white Fiesta."

She laughed. "Yes. I want you to sauce it like it's never been sauced before."

We kissed hard and deep and started getting busy with our hands. Our clothes were on the floor in a matter of seconds. She led me to her bedroom and we made love, wildly and passionately, as if we'd been starving for each other, and an hour later we were sitting against the headboard sharing a cold beer and a cigarette by candlelight.

Laurie leaned against my arm.

"This should be the part where you tell me your deepest darkest secrets," she said. "All about your past. About the physical and emotional wounds that shaped you into the man you are today."

"I don't know you that well," I said.

She slapped at me playfully. "I'm serious. I want to know all about you. When did you decide you wanted to be a private investigator? Were you a cop first, like the ones in the novels?"

I took a sip of beer and stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray on the nightstand.

"I was never a cop," I said.

"What, then?"

"Maybe I don't feel like talking about it right now."

She traced the scar on my belly with the tip of her finger.

"Was it really that bad?" she said.

"Let's just say you might want to take me in doses."

"Okay. Can I have my first dose now?"

"My mother died when I was five," I said. "She was driving a brand new Ford Fairlane home from the dealership when she smashed into an oak tree. There was no one else around. They think she might have swerved to miss a dog or something."

"That's terrible," Laurie said. "You must have been devastated."

"You could say that. I had to repeat the first grade. I guess that was why. I still have the St. Christopher statue that was on the dashboard. She'd taken it out of her old car when she traded it in. It's the only thing I have of hers. The only thing to remember her by. I don't even have any old photographs."

"So you were raised a Catholic?"

"Baptist. I don't know why she had the statue. But she did."

Laurie took the beer bottle from my hand and drained the last couple of ounces.

"Did your father raise you by himself after that?" she said.

"Doses, remember? That's enough for tonight."

"You're a mysterious man, Nicholas Colt. Maybe that's why I like you so much."

"I'm glad to know it's not just for my money," I said.

"Well, there's that too. It's not every day you run into a man with ninety dollars."

"And it's not every day you run into a woman with a voice like yours. Where did you learn to sing like that?"

"Are you really interested?"

"Sure."

She told me all about the domineering mother, the voice lessons, the pageants, the scholarship to Juilliard.

"And here I am," she said. "Tending bar in a nightclub. Filling beer mugs and lighting cigarettes and listening to a million different sob stories from a million different losers."

"Did you ever try to do anything with the singing?"

"I tried. And, as you can see, I failed."

"It's a tough business," I said. "But you really do have a beautiful voice."

"Thank you."

We slid down on the bed. With the warmth of the candlelight flickering on the ceiling and the warmth of Laurie's arm draped over my chest, the tender caress of her breath on my neck and her fingertips on my shoulder, a moment of utter joy and serenity washed over me, something that had been lacking in my life for a long time.

I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep, tried to end the day on this beautiful harmonic note, but I kept seeing Everett Harbaugh

sitting across from me at the little table in my camper. He was just a kid. Not even old enough to order a drink in a bar. He'd come to me for help, and the best I could do was nod off in front of him, spinning in circles on a hundred-proof river, sorrowfully drowning in my own wake. Papa Fell had sent him to me, and that was what he'd found. A forty-two-year-old drunk, hopelessly lost in the misery of the past. If I'd been sober, or if I'd just told him to come back another day, it wouldn't have happened. Not at my place, anyway. I knew I wasn't responsible for Everett's disappearance, but I also knew I wouldn't find any real peace until I found him.

I eased my way out of bed and padded toward the door naked.

"Where are you going?" Laurie said.

"Mind if I use your computer?"

"Aren't you tired?"

"It won't take long. I just want to look at the email Everett's ex-girlfriend was supposed to send."

"Sure. Go ahead. I think I'm going to call it a night. If you don't mind."

I walked back to the bed and kissed her.

"I'll be back in just a little while," I said.

"I forgot to tell you, I sewed the buttons back on your shirt."

"Thanks."

"There was a piece of paper in the pocket. I put it on the little table by the sofa."

"Okay. I'll try not to wake you when I come back to bed."

"Goodnight."

She blew the candle out as I was closing the door behind me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I walked to the foyer and put my clothes back on and draped hers neatly over the back of the couch. She'd been wearing panties with tiny pictures of Betty Boop printed on them. I hadn't noticed them before. I sat by the end table and picked up the piece of paper she'd found in my shirt. It was the receipt I'd taken from Everett's backpack, the one he'd written his Sibling Boards log-in information on. I'd forgotten all about it.

There was a steel and glass computer desk against the partial wall that separated the living room from the kitchen. I went over there and sat down and opened Laurie's Internet browser and logged onto my website. There were four new emails in my inbox. Two from Shelby Spelling, one from Joe Crawford, and one from Bradley Harbaugh.

I opened the one from Joe first. There was a link to a new Italian place in Atlantic Beach, and a short note asking me if I wanted to meet there for pizza and beer Thursday night instead of playing pool at Kelly's. I was writing him back, telling him I'd let him know, when I realized it was Thursday morning already. I deleted everything and told him I was too busy to do either this week. I would have to take a rain check, I said.

The email from Bradley Harbaugh was basically a thank-you note. He told me the retainer check was in the mail, that he still hadn't heard anything from or about Everett, and that he and his estranged wife were very upset and very worried. My reply was brief. I told him that I was working some leads, and that I wouldn't rest easy until we knew something.

There was a document attached to the first email from Shelby. I clicked on it and downloaded it. She must have been keeping some sort of journal all along, because the list of places Everett had been to since their breakup was extensive. There were dates and exact times along with all the locations. It was a nice list, professionally done, and it would save me a lot of time. It made me feel bad that I'd smeared ketchup and Big Woofa sauce all over her windshield. That is, until I opened her second email, which said **I'LL GET YOU BACK** in huge bold letters. I replied, saying that she should have gone on out and wiped the table off like I told her to, and that it would be in her best interest to just let it go now. Not that she would. Shelby Spelling would get her revenge, no matter how long it took or how much it cost. I knew the type. She wasn't going to leave me alone until she felt that she'd gotten even.

I wasn't worried, really. If she did anything very bad, I would just

shoot her.

I printed the list she'd put together and found a paperclip to bind the pages. I set that aside and logged onto the Sibling Boards, using Everett's user name and password.

To my surprise, there were thirty hits. Thirty sibling matches. Everett had sixteen sisters and fourteen brothers, all from the same donor.

I knew that it took a while sometimes for the matches to load, and that's why Everett hadn't seen them himself when he first registered.

The sperm donor had registered on the site as well, but he'd chosen the option to remain anonymous. He could see the siblings' names, but they couldn't see his. The siblings only knew that they were related, and that their father was still out there somewhere. So, even if Everett had been a little more patient and had discovered the brothers and sisters on his own, he still would have come to me to find the father. To make an attempt at finding him, anyway. Like I told Everett from the beginning, it's nearly impossible to find a donor who doesn't want to be found.

One of the siblings, a woman by the name of Stephanie Vowels, had written Everett a note. Everett had never seen it, of course. The last time he had logged on, sometime before he disappeared, the matches hadn't been loaded onto his page yet.

I debated over whether or not to open the note. It was really none of my business, and I didn't see how someone from Cocoa Beach could help me find a young man who'd been abducted two hundred miles away.

It was none of my business, but curiosity finally got the best of me. The note was dated Saturday, October 18, which told me that Everett hadn't logged onto the site since sometime before then.

I read the note:

Dear Everett,

I see that you're new to the site. I am too, and I just wanted to say hello. I've written to all the other siblings, but nobody has written back yet. I guess they will eventually. It's not like any of us are going to hang around here every day, probably, but I think it's cool that we all know about each other now. Maybe we could all meet in a central location sometime, Kansas or somewhere, and have a family reunion. But then I guess it wouldn't be a REunion, since we've never met before. Just a union, LOL. Anyway, you and I have something else in common besides the same biological father. We both turn twenty this month. My birthday is today, actually, and I noticed that yours is next Saturday, the twenty-fifth. So HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO US! Take care, Everett, and I hope to hear from you soon.

Stephanie Vowels. The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't think of where I'd heard it before. I thought about replying and telling her that Everett had been missing since Tuesday afternoon, but I didn't see any point in it. Everett could write her back himself, as soon as I found him. Or, if worse came to worst, she could read his obituary. I hoped that wouldn't be the case, but I knew it was a possibility. Either way, I was determined more than ever now to find Everett Harbaugh. I'd become as obsessed with knowing his whereabouts as Shelby had been before he disappeared.

I exited the Internet, grabbed Shelby's list and a beer from the refrigerator, sat on the couch and switched on the lamp. Edgar the cat stepped out from beneath the end table, yawning and stretching. He looked up at me. I looked down at him. After some deliberation, he jumped on the couch and inspected my left arm with his nose and his sandpaper tongue. He padded around for a few seconds, did a little jive with his shoulders as he extended his claws into the upholstery, curled up beside me and started purring. I guess he thought I was okay.

I looked over Shelby's list, trying to decide where to start first. Everett had been to his parents' house in Orange Park almost every weekend since he'd broken up with Shelby, and he had visited a variety of locations during those trips. He'd gone to Walmart, the AMC theater complex at the Orange Park Mall, Sonny's Barbecue, Chili's, Red Lobster, and a bunch of other restaurants, and several times he'd visited someone named Sam who lived in a gated community called Pace Island.

In Gainesville, he usually went to Albert's apartment on Tuesday nights. He went there to study calculus and smoke pot with Albert and the girl I'd talked to. Was her name Stephanie? Is that why the young lady from the Sibling Boards website sounded so familiar? I couldn't remember, and Shelby didn't have it written on her list. At any rate, I'd already talked to Albert and the girl, and I didn't figure they knew any more than they'd already told me.

Apparently Thursday night was a big party night in Gainesville. Everett and some of his fraternity brothers usually went out to a bar on that night. Sometimes several. Everett probably had a fake ID, although I hadn't found one in his wallet. Even if he didn't have one, college kids always know where they can go to get served.

The list went on and on. And, as I'd somewhat facetiously demanded, Shelby even included the name of the laundry service Everett used.

Shelby Spelling was a first-rate stalker. I had to give her that. If her career in restaurant management ever went sour, she could always make a decent living as a private investigator.

She could, really, but after thinking about it for a minute, I hoped it would never happen. There's enough riffraff in the profession as it is.

I decided to start first thing in the morning with the friend who lived in Pace Island. It was as good a place as any. Everett's parents had notified the sheriff's department, but as far as I knew nobody was calling it a kidnapping yet. It was a missing person's case, and those garnered about as much attention with police detectives as unpaid parking tickets. So when you got down to it, I was the only one actively searching for Everett. It was all on me.

I finished my beer, thought about getting another one, decided against it. When I turned the light off and stood up, Edgar raised his head, sleepily perturbed that he didn't have anything to snuggle next to now. He jumped off the couch and went back to his spot under the end table, and I quietly opened the bedroom door and went back to my spot next to Laurie.

CHAPTER TWELVE

She woke me up at eleven o'clock and asked me if I wanted some breakfast.

"I need to drive down to Hallows Cove and get my mail," I said. "And some clean clothes and my laptop. You want to come with me?"

"Sure, but I have to be at work at six tonight. So I'll need to be back here by five."

"Not a problem."

"Great. And don't forget, you promised to take me somewhere with all that money you made gambling yesterday."

I didn't bother telling her that there had been no gambling involved. I'd known I was going to win before the guy at the bar screwed his cue together.

Laurie poured some hot black coffee into two stainless steel mugs with lids, and we left the apartment. We took my car. When Laurie climbed into the passenger's seat, she picked up the newspaper I'd gotten at Woof-A-Burger and asked if I wanted her to throw it away for me.

"I still haven't read the comics," I said.

She smiled and tossed the paper to the backseat.

It was a nice day, sunny and a little cooler. I steered through the parking lot and out of the complex and headed south on the highway.

Laurie sipped her coffee.

"I'm ready for my second dose of Nicholas Colt," she said.

"This early?"

"Hey, it's five o'clock somewhere, right?"

"I guess that's true," I said.

"Let's start where we left off. You said your mother died when you were five. Did your father raise you by himself after that?"

"My father bailed on us when I was three. He got out of the navy, and I guess he decided family life wasn't for him after all. I barely even remember him. My mother married someone else right away, out of necessity, I imagine. She was a waitress, and she probably couldn't afford to support us by herself. So after she died, my stepfather was kind of stuck with me. I guess you could say he raised me."

"Did you like him?"

I cracked the window and lit a cigarette. I asked Laurie if she wanted one, and she said no thanks.

"He was an asshole," I said. "An abusive alcoholic. But he was all I had. He taught me how to fish, and how to shoot a gun, and that was about it. He was drunk most of the time."

"That's a shame."

"I did all right, I guess. The guitar pretty much saved me."

"Tell me about that," Laurie said.

"There was never anyone around in the afternoons when I got home from school, and there wasn't much on TV except soap operas. It got really boring sometimes. When I was nine, I started digging around in my stepfather's closet one day, and I found a cheap electric guitar and a chord book. I sat down and taught myself a few chords. By six that evening, my fingers were sore and blistered and I could strum along with "Your Cheatin' Heart" on the record player. At least I thought I was strumming along with it. I learned later that I was doing it all wrong."

"It was your first day," Laurie said. "Give yourself a break."

"My stepfather didn't give me a break, I'll tell you that. He beat my ass when he got home and found out I'd been going through his things. Maybe I deserved it. I don't know."

"Nobody deserves that."

"He beat my ass, but he saw how much I loved that old Japanese guitar. He ended up giving it to me a few days later. It was his way of saying he was sorry for the welts on my backside, I guess. He even brought home a set of new strings one day and a beat-up amplifier he'd found at a pawnshop. By the time I was twelve, I was in a band and we were playing dances in the school gym."

"So maybe your stepfather wasn't so bad after all," she said.

"That's what I thought, until he stabbed me in the gut with a steak knife one evening."

"What?"

"I usually tell people the scar on my belly is from an appendectomy, but it isn't."

"That's terrible. You could have died."

"Tell me about it."

She was silent for a few beats. I drank some coffee and lit another cigarette.

"Well, at least you made it," she said. "Surely that was the worst thing that ever happened to you."

"Not even close. But that's enough about me. If you want to know anything else, you can read the Wikipedia article."

"You have a Wikipedia article?"

I flicked my ash out the window. "You really don't know who I am, do you?"

"I guess not," she said. "But as soon as I can get to a computer, I'm going to find out."

I steered into the parking lot of the Hallows Cove post office.

"I'll be right back," I said.

I left the engine running, got out and walked inside and got my mail. Along with a credit card offer and a second notice from the electric company, there was a check for a thousand dollars from Bradley Harbaugh. I climbed back into the truck, drove to the bank and deposited it.

"I'm getting hungry," Laurie said. "You want to stop and get something to eat?"

"Sure. Let me just run by my place real quick and grab some clothes. It's only a couple of miles down the road."

"Okay."

I left the bank and made a U-turn and took a right at the next light. I took another right on Lake Barkley Road, cruised the circle at the posted speed limit, muscled up the hill to Lot 27.

Everett's car was gone. The police must have towed it away.

"This is your house?" Laurie said.

"Don't you like it?"

She smiled. "It's fine. Just not what I expected from a guy with ninety dollars and his own Wikipedia article."

"Wait till you see the inside," I said.

"Can't wait."

I killed the engine and we climbed out of the truck. When I went to unlock the Airstream's hatch, I could see that someone had tampered with it. Someone had pried it open, probably with a cat's claw or a tire tool.

And I had a pretty good idea who it was.

"Shelby," I said.

"Huh?"

"Someone broke into my camper."

I opened the door, stepped up and inside. Laurie took my hand and followed.

"Wow," she said. "I was expecting a bachelor's pad, but this is ridiculous."

"Ridiculous isn't the word."

The place was totally trashed. Someone had dumped the contents of all the drawers on the floor, as well as everything that had been in the refrigerator. There were clothes and bologna slices and beer bottles and frozen dinners strewn everywhere, and peanut butter had been smeared on the walls.

And on the galley table.

And on my laptop.

"You think Everett's ex did this?" Laurie said.

"Probably. I'm going to kill her."

"Maybe saucing the white Fiesta wasn't such a great idea after all."

I couldn't help but laugh at that.

"It was still worth it," I said. "It gave us our nickname for you-know-what."

"You can say hot, passionate, unbelievable, once-in-a-lifetime good sex. We're all adults here."

I leaned over and kissed her on the lips, and the horrible mess that surrounded us momentarily dissolved. Unfortunately, it was still there when we opened our eyes.

"I don't have time for this," I said. "I'm going to have to hire someone to come in and clean all this up."

"Won't your insurance take care of it?"

"What insurance?"

"Oh."

I sifted through the wreckage and found some clothes that hadn't been soiled with broken eggs or leftover chili or coffee grounds. I stuffed them into a gym bag along with my toothbrush and my jug of Old Fitzgerald. Shelby, or whoever had trashed the place, hadn't touched those things for some reason.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

I couldn't get the hatch to close, so I grabbed a roll of duct tape and secured it with that. The tape wouldn't prevent anyone from coming along and taking whatever they wanted, but it would at least keep the raccoons and the rain out.

Before we headed back down the hill, I called Joe Crawford and asked him if he knew of a good cleaning service.

"You need a maid?" he said.

"More like the kind of outfit that comes in after a tornado or a hurricane."

I explained what had happened. He gave me a number, and I called and arranged for the service to meet me at the camper at three-thirty for an estimate. The lady I talked to said that the price would depend on the amount of work involved, but to count on at least two hundred dollars. I hung up, disgusted with myself for ever engaging a psychopath like Shelby Spelling.

"Where do you want to eat?" Laurie said.

"I don't think I can afford to eat anymore."

"Come on. I'll buy you a cheeseburger."

"Sounds good. Let me just make one more call, and then we'll go."

"Okay."

I punched in Bradley Harbaugh's number, and he answered on the first ring. I told him the police had towed Everett's car.

"I don't think so," he said. "I talked to them a while ago, and they said it was scheduled to be picked up first thing tomorrow morning. They said that an officer had driven over there and tagged it, but that one of the tow trucks is in the shop and the other one is busy

elsewhere.”

“The car’s not here,” I said. “Maybe the cops got their truck fixed and came over here and picked it up after all.”

“Maybe. I’m going to call them and find out. I’ll call you back and let you know.”

“Okay.”

I hung up, put the Jimmy in gear, and headed out.

“All right,” Laurie said. “Now I’m *really* hungry.”

She was looking through my old newspaper. She’d reached around to the backseat and grabbed it while I was on the phone.

“I need to talk to someone over at Pace Island,” I said. “There’s a burger joint on the way.”

“You’re still going to be able to get me home in time for work, right?”

“Probably. What would happen if you didn’t make it in tonight?”

“The bar manager would have to stay and close, and he’s already been there since eleven this morning. Plus, I really can’t afford to miss a shift.”

“I’m meeting the cleaning person at three-thirty,” I said. “We’ll head on back to your place after that.”

“Okay.”

We rode in silence for a few minutes, Laurie with her nose in yesterday’s news and me with a million thoughts running through my head. It intrigued me that she didn’t know about my history as a world-class guitarist in a top recording act. I hadn’t asked Laurie her age, but my guess was mid-thirties. She would have been nineteen or so in the middle of my band’s heyday, definitely part of our demographic. And most people who were alive during that era, people who were old enough to read, anyway, remember the name Nicholas Colt from the plane crash, even if they never bought any of the records. It made me wonder if she was being honest with me about that. Then again, maybe I just wasn’t as famous as I thought I was.

I reached over and pulled a CD out of the glove box, *Dead Ringer*, my band’s first album. A couple of the songs still got airplay on the classic rock stations, and I still got a small check once a year for my share of the songwriting royalties. I slid the CD into the player, thinking the music might jog Laurie’s memory. It bugged me, in a way, that she didn’t have a clue about that part of my history, if in fact she really didn’t, but it was also a bit refreshing that a woman of Laurie’s caliber actually liked me without knowing that I used to be a rock star.

She didn’t pay any attention to the music. She seemed to be in her own little world, lost and alone somewhere on page A7.

“You like these guys?” I said.

"Huh?"

"This band. Colt Forty-Five. I know you've heard of them."

"Actually, I don't listen to a lot of southern rock. I was into punk when I was a kid, then alternative and grunge and all that. Not typical for a girl who grew up in this part of Florida, I guess, although these days I do listen to country sometimes. The old stuff, you know? Conway and Loretta, George and Tammy, Waylon and—"

"So you're telling me you've never heard of Colt Forty-Five?" I said.

"I've heard of them. Just never paid much attention."

"Oh."

She glanced back down at the newspaper.

"Isn't it terrible about that girl down in Cocoa Beach?" she said.

"What girl?"

"Her name's Stephanie Vowels. They found her dangling from a bridge the other day, about twenty miles from where she lived. Someone had slipped a noose around her neck and pushed her off."

That was where I'd heard the name, I thought. From skimming the newspaper yesterday. My heart started beating a little faster.

"She's one of Everett's sisters," I said.

"Everett Harbaugh? The guy you're looking for?"

"Yeah. How do they know someone pushed her? How do they know she didn't commit suicide?"

"Her hands were tied behind her back," Laurie said. "She couldn't have done that herself. What makes you think she was Everett's sister?"

"I don't think it. I know it. You remember that receipt you found in my shirt when you sewed the buttons back on? The writing on the back of it was a user name and a password. *Everett's* user name and password. There's a website where people who were conceived from a specimen in a sperm bank can try to connect with their siblings from the same donor. Some of them, like Everett, even try to connect with the donors themselves, although they're hardly ever successful. Most sperm donors, even the ones who register there on the website, choose to remain anonymous, for obvious reasons. Anyway, Stephanie Vowels had written a note to Everett, but he disappeared before he ever got a chance to read it. They both had the same donor number, which means they had the same biological father. And they were both born in October, just days apart. Stephanie had sent the message to Everett on her birthday, actually."

"And that's the day she died," Laurie said.

Acid rose from the pit my stomach to the top of my throat. I took a sip of cold coffee to swallow it back. I steered into the burger place and pulled around to the drive-thru. There were two cars ahead of us.

"I know I promised you lunch," I said. "But we're going to have to

get it to go.”

Laurie shrugged. She hadn’t put two and two together, but I had. I needed to get to a computer as soon as possible.

I skipped talking to the friend at Pace Island and drove straight back to Laurie’s apartment. We ate our burgers on the way. It was a little after three when we got there. I called the cleaning service and told them that I wouldn’t be able to meet them after all, but to go on in and look at the place and then call me with an estimate.

Laurie walked over to the sliding glass door that led to her balcony and pulled the blinds back.

“Why were you in such a hurry to get to the computer?” she said.

“I’ll tell you in a minute.”

If Shelby Spelling hadn’t destroyed my laptop, I could have gotten the information I needed while we were out. I’d burned almost an hour on the road since Laurie told me about Stephanie Vowels being murdered. It was an hour I would never be able to get back, and an hour Everett Harbaugh would never be able to get back.

If my theory was correct, it was an hour that might mean the difference between life and death.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I logged onto the Sibling Boards using Everett's user name and password. I read the message from Stephanie Vowels again. She and Everett had been born the same month and the same year and only days apart. Seven days, actually. One week. Stephanie's twentieth birthday was last Saturday, and Everett's was this coming Saturday.

To me, it seemed like quite a coincidence that Stephanie had been murdered on her twentieth birthday and that Everett had been kidnapped four days prior to his. Too much of a coincidence to ignore.

Joe Crawford knows me better than anyone on the planet, and he's right when he says that I jump to conclusions sometimes. I know that about myself, and I hoped that my vivid imagination was all this little hunch amounted to.

I went through the list of matches on Everett's page. There were fifteen girls and fourteen boys, not counting Stephanie Vowels. They were all listed in alphabetical order. I clicked on the first one, a girl named Felicia Alcott, and saw from her date of birth that she wouldn't turn twenty for two and a half more years. Next in line was a boy named Tyler Chadwell, who wouldn't turn twenty for a little over six months. I continued down the list until I got to Philip D. Davenport, who had turned twenty last year on the day before Christmas.

I opened a search engine and typed in *Philip D. Davenport Dallas Texas Obituary*.

And there it was, in black and white, right there on the website for one of the Dallas newspapers.

Philip Davenport died near his home in Irving early Tuesday morning, December 24, apparently the victim of a robbery.

There was some information on the memorial service and a request that donations be sent to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, Philip's favorite charity, in lieu of flowers. At the bottom of the paragraph, there was a link to the related story in the Metro section. I clicked on that and skimmed through the article.

Philip had been out with some friends, celebrating his birthday at a pizza place. He'd left the restaurant alone, and he'd been stabbed to death outside a convenience store on his way home. The crime was under investigation, but there weren't any leads so far.

I didn't need to search any further.

Stephanie Vowels had been killed on her twentieth birthday.

Philip Davenport had been killed on his twentieth birthday.

If I didn't do something to stop it, Everett Harbaugh was going to be killed on *his* twentieth birthday, which was less than two days away.

I called Everett's father.

"Hey," he said. "I was just about to call you. Nobody from the sheriff's department towed Everett's car. It must have been stolen."

"Incredible," I said. "Listen, I need to talk to the police detective who's investigating Everett's disappearance. Do you have a number where I can get in touch with him or her?"

He gave me the number.

"What's going on?" he said.

"I'll call you back and explain in a few minutes. I need to get in touch with that detective right away."

"I understand that, but—"

I hung up on him. I hated to be rude, but it was in the best interest of his son. I was almost positive now about who had abducted Everett, but there was no way for me to find him myself. The police needed to handle it.

I punched in the number for Detective Barry Fleming with the Violent Crimes Unit. It rang about twenty times before he finally picked up.

"This is Fleming," he said.

"My name's Nicholas Colt. Bradley Harbaugh hired me to find his son."

"Who?"

"Bradley Harbaugh. His son Everett disappeared late Tuesday afternoon."

"Hold on," Fleming said. "Let me see if I can find the report."

"Okay."

Fleming didn't press a button to put me on hold, as I'd expected him to do. He dropped his phone on something hard, probably his desk, and the impact cracked sharply against my left eardrum. I switched to my right ear and heard what sounded like a metal file drawer opening, followed by the sound of papers being shuffled.

"Here it is," Fleming said. "Tuesday evening, lot twenty three on Lake Barkley, new BMW, UF student, Phi Epsilon Alpha Kappa fraternity. It's all here. What can I do for you?"

"He was kidnapped," I said. "And I know who did it. He's going to die Saturday if you don't—"

"Whoa, partner. How do you know he was kidnapped?"

"He was at my place when it happened. I'd been drinking. He walked outside to get a pen out of his car, and I nodded off for a few minutes. When I woke up, the BMW was still there, but Everett was gone."

"And?"

"He left the keys in the ignition. He left his cell phone, wallet, everything. He wouldn't have done that. Nobody would have. He was

taken against his will.”

“I guess it’s possible,” Fleming said. “An officer went out there this morning and tagged the car to be towed. It was locked, but she noted in her report that there was a cell phone on the center console. She saw it through the window. We’ll verify everything else tomorrow at the impound lot when the truck brings the car in. Do you have the keys?”

“Yeah, but the car’s not there anymore,” I said. “Someone stole it.”

“Someone stole the car?”

“Yeah, but that’s irrelevant right now. I’m telling you, Everett was kidnapped, and he’s going to be murdered if he isn’t found before Saturday.”

“From everything you’ve told me, and everything I have here on my desk, it sounds as though the young man *could* have been abducted, but there’s still no real evidence to that effect. Certainly not enough to take to the FBI. What makes you think his life is in danger?”

“Everett is the child of a sperm donor,” I said. “The donor has already killed at least two of Everett’s siblings, both on their twentieth birthday. Everett turns twenty day after tomorrow, and he’s missing.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re saying that a sperm donor killed two people. How do you know this?”

I told him about the research I’d done on the Sibling Boards, about Stephanie Vowels and Philip Davenport.

“Everett has thirty siblings,” I said, practically shouting now. “Thirty that I know of, anyway. Thirty who signed up on the Boards. Sixteen girls and fourteen boys. Apparently the donor who fathered all those children is using the information from the website to track them down and kill them. On their twentieth birthdays. If only one murder had occurred, we might be able to call it a coincidence. But two? Come on, detective. How much clearer can it be?”

“To my knowledge, there’s still no evidence that Everett Harbaugh was abducted,” Fleming said. “Maybe he took off with a friend or a girl or something. Kids his age do that kind of stuff.”

“Have you been listening to anything I’ve said?”

“Absolutely. And while all that does sound suspicious, there’s still no hard evidence that a crime has been committed. Everett Harbaugh is missing. A report has been filed, and we’ve combed the area where he was last known to have been, and we’re keeping an eye out. But it’s not against the law to be missing, Mr. Colt. In most of these cases, the missing person has chosen to be missing, and he or she has the right to be left alone. I’m talking about adults, of course. As a police agency, we like to keep our intrusion into people’s personal lives to a minimum. Surely you can understand that.”

“I understand that you’re an idiot,” I said.

“Ah. So I’m an idiot now. Okay.”

“Listen, Detective Fleming, I know the name of the sperm bank Everett’s mother went to, and I know the donor number. You need to get a court order for Klein Fertility in Orange Park to turn over the name and contact information for donor one-seven-three, and you need to do it now. Immediately. Everett Harbaugh’s life depends on it.”

“And what exactly am I supposed to tell the judge? That we’re going to totally invade this sperm donor’s privacy because some two-bit private eye has a hunch that his missing client might be in danger? Give me a break, Colt. It’s just not going to happen.”

“How can you be so stupid?” I said.

“This conversation is over, but I want you to give us a call if you come up with any real evidence that Everett Harbaugh is in jeopardy.”

“What do you mean by real evidence? His dead body?”

I heard a click, and Detective Barry Fleming of the Violent Crimes Unit was gone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Laurie was sitting on the couch, gently running her fingers through Edgar's thick fur. I walked over to the sliding glass door and gazed out at the wooded area behind the apartment complex.

"I gather that didn't go well," Laurie said.

"Did you hear what I was telling him?" I shouted. "Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

"Hey, don't cop an attitude with me. I'm on your side, remember?"

I turned and faced her. Edgar meowed sharply and jumped off the sofa. He walked to the kitchen, sniffed his food dish, took a drink of water, and padded off toward the bedroom.

"Sorry," I said. "It's just so frustrating having to deal with idiots. To me, it's obvious what has happened. Everett's sperm donor father kidnapped him, and he's going to kill him Saturday when he turns twenty. It's not rocket science."

"No, it's not rocket science, but you have to admit it's pretty bizarre. To say the least. And I guess it's possible that the two deaths were a coincidence."

"Is that what you think?" I said.

"I'm just saying that it's possible. Maybe you should research the rest of the siblings and see if any more of them were murdered."

"Or maybe I should take matters into my own hands. There's just not a lot of time to waste, Laurie. I don't know Sperm Dad's motive yet, but his MO seems pretty clear: he's systematically eliminating all the offspring that resulted from his association with Klein Fertility back in the eighties."

"What did the detective say?"

"He said there's no hard evidence that a crime has been committed. He seems afraid to do anything, afraid that he's going to infringe on Everett's right to be missing and Sperm Dad's right to be anonymous. I've never heard of anything so ridiculous. It's almost like I'm living in a Kafka novel or something."

"A what?"

"A Kafka novel. Franz Kafka. One of Everett's fraternity brothers was sitting on the porch at the PEAK house reading one of his books for a class, a novel called *The Trial*. It explores the absurdity of government bureaucracies, among other things."

"You actually read stuff like that?" Laurie said.

I walked over to the couch and sat down beside her.

"I'm going to do something crazy tonight," I said. "Probably the craziest thing I've ever done. I don't want to do it, but I don't see any

other way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about breaking into Klein Fertility and searching their records for donor number one-seven-three. The information on him has to be there somewhere, right?”

“I don’t know. But breaking into their office seems a little extreme. You could go to jail for doing that.”

“I really don’t know what else to do,” I said. “I can’t just sit around and wait for Everett to show up dead somewhere.”

Laurie leaned over and kissed me.

“I have to get ready for work,” she said. “I hope you’re here when I get home tonight.”

“I hope so too.”

She reached into her purse and grabbed her keys. She slid one off the ring and handed it to me.

“That’s my door key,” she said. “I have another one in my car.”

“Thanks. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should research the other siblings before I do anything else.”

“I think it would be wise. Anyway, I better jump in the shower now.”

While Laurie got ready for work, I started going through the list of Everett’s brothers and sisters from the Sibling Boards website. I was still at it when she left the apartment. It took me over two hours to do the research on all of them.

As far as I could tell, the rest of them were still alive. But that didn’t ease my mind much, because none of the remaining twenty-eight had turned twenty years old yet. Tyler Chadwell was the closest, and his birthday was still over six months away.

Maybe it *was* a coincidence that Stephanie Vowels and Philip Davenport had both been murdered the day they turned twenty, but I didn’t believe it. I was convinced that their sperm donor father had killed them, and that he was going to kill Everett Harbaugh on Saturday.

I took a shower and changed into the clothes I’d brought from my camper. I was checking my phone for messages when I realized I’d been running around the past couple of days without my revolver. It was still stuffed behind one of Laurie’s couch cushions. I’d forgotten about it. I grabbed it and slid it onto my belt.

There was one message on my phone. It was from the cleaning service. They said it was going to cost three hundred and fifty dollars to put my Airstream back in order. I called, but they were gone for the day. I left a voicemail for them to go ahead with the job.

It was eight o’clock by the time I left Laurie’s apartment. It had been dark for a couple of hours. Klein Fertility had closed for business at

five, and it was a safe bet that everyone was out of the office by now.

I walked out to my Jimmy and saw right away that both of my back tires were flat. Not just one of them, but both of them, which meant the spare wasn't going to do me any good. At that moment, I decided that I really was going to kill Shelby Spelling. She'd gotten me back, all right. Three-fifty for the camper, and now a pair of truck tires that I knew were going to run at least a hundred apiece. All because I'd smeared a little ketchup and Big Woofa sauce on her windshield. Unbelievable.

It was too late to buy tires tonight. Everything was closed. I walked back into the apartment and called a cab. While I was waiting for it to get there, I searched the computer for the nearest rental car place.

It was 8:56 when I got there. I paid the taxi driver and walked inside with my wallet open.

The clerk standing at the counter wore a dark blue business suit and a white shirt and a striped tie. Incongruous with the professional attire, his hair had been dyed bright orange and his ears had been stabbed with multiple silver studs. I guessed he was in his early twenties and hadn't been out in the sun any of that time. You could see the veins in his cheeks. He was running the tape on his computerized cash register.

He looked up at me when I walked through the door.

"I'm sorry sir, but we're closed."

"The sign says nine o'clock."

"And it's nine now."

"No it's not," I said. "It's two minutes till. I need a car."

"I'm afraid that's going to be impossible tonight. We open at seven in the morning, if you'd like to come back."

I shook my head. "I can't wait until seven in the morning. I need a car tonight."

"There's a place called Rent-A-Gem over in Mandarin," he said. "They rent used cars. They're open until ten, I think, if you want to give them a try."

I slapped my debit card on the counter. "I need a car tonight. It's an emergency. I don't have time to play around."

"I've already closed out my—"

"I don't care. I'm not leaving here until you rent me a car."

He reached for the phone, but I grabbed his wrist before he had a chance to pick it up.

"I'm going to have you arrested," he said.

"No you're not. You're going to open that register back up, and you're going to rent me a car. You want to know why? Ever hear of a motorcycle club called the Five Points Posse? Their leader, a sociopath known as Fatso, happens to be a good friend of mine. Fatso weighs

over three hundred pounds. That's why they call him Fatso. For some reason, he hates pale, wormy little retail clerks who pierce their ears and color their hair. He hates them so much, he could probably be persuaded to have a few of his chain-toting psycho thugs follow one of them home sometime. Maybe even tonight. It's still early for guys like me and Fatso."

"All right," he said. "Let go of me. It'll take about fifteen minutes to reboot the system."

I let go of his wrist.

"Great," I said. "I'll just sit over here and have a cup of coffee while I wait."

"That coffee's been there since this afternoon."

"Then I'll make a fresh pot. Don't worry, I can manage. You just tend to your business there."

He tended to his business, and I stepped over to the waiting room and built a pot of coffee. While it brewed, I thumbed through a copy of *Sports Illustrated*, and it reminded me that the New York Yankees and the Florida Marlins were supposed to have played game five of the World Series this afternoon. I supposed they had, barring a rainout. I turned on the little television set in the corner, switched it to one of the sports channels, and waited for the rolling text at the bottom of the screen to show the score.

Florida won. Now they were up three games to two. One more win and they would be the world champions of baseball. Friday was a travel day, and game six would be played Saturday afternoon at three o'clock in New York. If all went well, I would invite Everett Harbaugh and his parents out to watch the game with me. If all didn't go well, Everett would be dead and I would be in jail.

I switched off the television and poured myself a cup of coffee. I kept pacing and looking at my watch until the clerk finally called me back over to the counter. It was almost ten o'clock by the time I got out of there. I left the parking lot with a brand new Chevrolet Caprice, and the clerk left the parking lot with a bruised wrist and a bruised ego.

I was just happy that he didn't call my bluff. If there was anyone in the world who wasn't going to do me a favor, it was Fatso from the Five Points Posse. I'd made sure of that the other night at Arenque's when I pointed a gun at his crotch.

I stopped at a pharmacy and bought a box of examination gloves. The kind doctors and nurses use. The only color they had was an embarrassing shade of purple, but I was hoping that nobody would see me wearing them anyway. I was counting on it.

I drove south for a couple of miles, and then took a left. My destination was on the right, a few blocks past the hospital. I steered

into the driveway two buildings beyond Klein Fertility and pulled around to the back, out of sight from the road. I turned the headlights off and killed the engine. It was dark back there, and quiet except for the traffic passing by.

I opened the trunk and found the tire tool. I figured I would break into the sperm bank the same way Shelby Spelling had broken into my camper. I didn't think there would be a burglar alarm. After all, who's going to steal sperm? There's always plenty to go around for free.

I donned a pair of the sexy purple gloves, slinked across the shadowy parking lots and made my way over to the Klein building. I stepped up to the back door, the employees' entrance. It said **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY**. I jammed the tire tool into the space between the door and the jamb and gave it a quick jerk. The wood splintered with a loud crack and the door swung inward and some lock parts jangled to the floor. I quickly stepped inside and switched on the miniature flashlight I keep on my keychain, found a chair and shoved it against the door to keep it closed.

To the left there was a small desk and some cardboard boxes stacked against the wall and a portable partition with a bunch of lab jackets hanging on hooks. The partition ended a few feet from the wall on the right side, creating a doorway that led to the laboratory. There were sinks and cabinets and machines and microscopes. Everything looked very clean and state-of-the-art.

Against one wall, there were a series of stainless steel chests. Their shiny round lids had little steering wheels on top of them, like the watertight hatches you see on ships, and signs behind them warned that liquid nitrogen was in use. On the front of each chest there was a toll-free number to call in case of emergency.

I figured those were the freezers where they kept the specimens. I wondered how many gallons they kept in those things, and I wondered what would happen if I opened them and allowed the cold air to escape. My fourteen-year-old brain considered all that for a few seconds, and then I moved on.

There was a metal door with a lever-type knob at the far left side of the lab. I walked over there and opened it and stepped through and let it close behind me. The numbered doors lining the corridor on the other side reminded me of the examination rooms at a doctor's office. Same kind of setup. I opened door number three and scanned the room with my flashlight. There was a couch against the wall and a coffee table with a bunch of magazines spread on top of it. Obviously, these were the rooms where they sent the donors to "produce a specimen." I wondered if the nurse ever came in and gave them a helping hand. My fourteen-year-old brain again. I couldn't help myself.

The corridor ended in a T, with perpendicular hallways leading left and right. I chose a direction, navigating as quickly as I could. To the left there was a waiting room and a reception window, and to the right there was what I'd come for: the front office.

Behind the computer monitors and phones and desks and chairs and file cabinets, hundreds of clients' charts lined shelves that ran from the floor to the ceiling. Now all I had to do was find the chart for donor number 173. Piece of cake, I thought. I figured I would be out of there in ten minutes, maybe less.

I grabbed a stepstool and started with the folders on the top shelf, working left to right, pulling them out and looking at the numbers stenciled on the covers. Unfortunately, the charts weren't arranged the way I thought they would be. They weren't categorized sequentially, by number. I guess that would have made too much sense. Instead, they were in alphabetical order.

And of course I had no clue what 173's name was. If I'd known his name, I wouldn't have had to break into the sperm bank in the first place. Now I faced thousands of patient records that, for me, were in random order.

I stepped off the stool, stood back and looked at the shelves, thinking it would probably take all night to go through the charts one-by-one. A daunting task, to say the least, and one I didn't have time for. I needed to find another way.

I figured there was a cross reference somewhere that matched the numbers with the names. I opened desk drawers and file cabinets, searching for a volume the size of a phonebook, but I never found anything like that. What I did find was a list of user names and passwords that someone named Bobbi had scribbled on a sheet of copy paper. It was in the back of a drawer, in a file marked *LIQUID NITROGEN MATERIAL SAFETY DATA SHEET*.

Bobbi must have considered the file a relatively safe place to stash her secret paper. When I thought about it, I supposed it was. OSHA required the Material Safety Data Sheet to be on site, but the employees there at Klein Fertility probably never had any use for it. If a problem ever came up, a leak or a spill, they were probably trained to call the emergency number on the front of the freezers and let the experts take care of it. So it was a fairly safe bet that nobody ever looked at the file, and anyone who did would already have access to the company's computer programs anyway. Anyone except me, of course.

I sat at one of the desks and turned on one of the computers. The monitor blinked on. I sat there and stared at it, hoping it wouldn't illuminate the front window enough to be seen from outside.

A screensaver with the Klein Fertility logo and a dozen or so icons

finally stabilized in front of me. I clicked on the icon that said RECORDS and got a screen that required a user name and password. There were five sets on the cheat sheet I'd found in the file cabinet. None of them was labeled, and I knew from experience in similar settings that a program as exclusive as this one would probably only give me three chances to log on. After that, I would be locked out and referred to administration.

If that happened, I was doomed. Or, rather, Everett Harbaugh was doomed. If I couldn't log onto the database, there was no other way for me to find the donor's name in time to save him.

I started at the top of the list. I typed in Bobbi72 GTR969902, and got some red text over the log-in box that said *USER NAME AND PASSWORD INCORRECT!*

Of course it was incorrect. For all I knew, Bobbi72 GTR969902 was Bobbi's log-in information for her personal email.

I tried the second user name and password on the list, got the same result. Now I had three more to choose from, and only one more chance to log on successfully. It felt like a game of Russian roulette, only it wasn't my life that was on the line. It was Everett Harbaugh's.

I stared at the piece of copy paper Bobbi had written her information on, trying to find some sort of insight into her thought process, essentially trying to see something that wasn't there.

I told myself to just do it. Just pick one and go with it.

And then I did.

Of the three remaining lines of text, I selected the one in the middle. There was no rhyme or reason to my choice. It was totally random.

I typed Bobbi7290 into the user box, and G96T99R02 into the password box, and then I waited.

And waited.

Then, slowly, against the odds, the home screen for the Klein Fertility Client Record Database faded in. Success! Finally, I was where I needed to be.

Unfortunately, a few seconds later, while I was still celebrating my little victory, I noticed the blue lights flashing outside the window.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I got up, darted over to the window, and peeked through the blinds. A police cruiser had pulled into the bicycle lane in front of Klein Fertility and was creeping by at about five miles per hour. One car, one officer. I could see him staring toward the window and talking into the microphone of his two-way radio. I thought he was going to drive away, but then he took a right into Klein's parking lot and gunned it toward the back of the building.

I bolted back to the computer desk, sat down and stared at the monitor with my fingers over the keyboard, knowing I needed to hurry. Knowing it was a matter of life and death. If that cop walked in and caught me doing what I was doing, it was game over. I would go to jail, and Everett would die.

There was a search box in the top right corner of the screen. I typed in 173 and hit *Enter*. And there it was. Three pages of information on a man named Trent Appleton.

I heard a car door slam. I figured the police officer had gotten out of his cruiser and was walking toward the building now. As soon as he took one look at the back door, he would know there had been a breakin. My only hope was that he wouldn't charge in by himself, that he would call for backup and wait outside until another officer or two arrived. It would be the smart thing to do, and I imagined it was department protocol. At any rate, I knew I didn't have much time. Not enough to figure out how to route Trent Appleton's information to one of the printers in the office. I needed to get what I could, and then get out of there. Pronto.

I pulled a drawer open and found a pencil and wrote down Appleton's address and phone number on the sheet of copy paper Bobbi had used for her crib notes. I folded the paper and stuffed it into my back pocket and killed the power on the computer. I didn't want anyone to know that the database had been compromised. If anyone found out, Klein Fertility might alert all of their clients to the fact, and then Appleton would know that someone was on to him. I didn't want him to know anything. I wanted it to be a surprise.

The wooden legs on the chair I'd jammed against the back door screeched against the rubber floor tiles as the officer entered the building. He hadn't waited for backup after all. Or maybe another cruiser had pulled in without me noticing. If that was the case, I was toast. One officer would cover the front of the building while the other entered through the rear. No way to escape.

I peeked through the blinds again. I couldn't see anything, but it

was dark and my field of vision was limited. An officer could have been standing far enough to either side of the building to be completely out of sight from the window.

I decided to exit through the front door. I really didn't have much of a choice. I cupped my hand over my flashlight and switched it on and headed back to the hallway. I could see well enough to avoid bumping into the furniture, but that was about it. I walked past the reception window and the waiting area, found the door and clicked open the deadbolt. I turned the flashlight off and put my keys in my pocket.

"Police," the officer behind me shouted. "We know you're in there. Exit through the rear of the facility with your hands laced behind your head. Do it now, and nobody gets hurt."

His voice was distant and muffled. I figured he was still back in the lab. I eased through the front door, looked left and right, and took off running across the driveway. I jumped over a stand of shrubs that separated Klein Fertility from the imaging center next door, hurried into the shadows and duck-walked to the back of the building and across the parking lot to the address where I'd started. The Chevy Caprice was there waiting for me. Nobody else was around. I climbed in and started the car, steered it out of the driveway and eased into the flow of traffic. No sirens, no flashing blue lights in my rearview mirror. I'd made it.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I kept the car at the speed limit, but my heart was doing one-twenty or better. I could feel it pounding behind my eyeballs. I turned into Dairy Queen, took a deep breath and turned the car off and got out and walked inside. I went to the restroom and splashed some cold water on my face and tried to calm down. My hands were shaking and a rhinoceros had decided to park its ass on my chest. I needed to quit smoking. If I didn't, I wasn't going to make it to fifty. Maybe not even to forty-five.

I dried my face and hands and walked up front and ordered a small Sprite, trying to look as normal as possible. The girl behind the counter looked a lot like the girl I'd talked to at Woof-A-Burger in Gainesville, only her nametag didn't say Ashley. It said Cammy. Short for Camille, I guessed.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"Yeah."

I paid for the drink and sat at a table. The place was deserted except for a couple of teenage boys shoveling ice cream into their mouths and laughing about things that teenage boys tend to laugh about. Boobs and farts and such. I pulled the piece of paper out of my pocket and recited Trent Appleton's address and phone number over and over in my head about a thousand times. Once I had the information committed to memory, I ripped the paper to shreds and shoved all the

little pieces into the trash can on my way out. I didn't want Bobbi's passwords to fall into the wrong hands.

When I pushed the door open to leave the restaurant, I saw that a police car had pulled in and parked one spot over from the Caprice. I didn't know if it was the same officer or not, but I figured it probably was.

I stood on the sidewalk and lit a cigarette. The cop got out of the car and walked toward me. He swaggered on by without looking up or saying anything. He pushed the door open and stepped inside the restaurant, and I walked on over to the Caprice and got in and started it and drove away.

It was almost midnight by the time I made it back to Laurie's apartment. She wasn't home from work yet. I grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, sat at the computer and logged onto one of the people-finder sites I subscribe to. I knew that the address Klein Fertility had on file for Trent Appleton probably wasn't current, but it would be helpful in differentiating the man I was looking for from all the other Trent Appletons in the country.

I spent about thirty minutes doing searches. As it turned out, he still lived in Jacksonville, not far from the residence he'd been at when he was donating sperm. It made sense that he was still in the area, even though some of his offspring had ended up far, far away. People generally die less than a hundred miles from where they were born. I read that in a magazine one time, so it must be true. I looked in Laurie's desk drawer, found a ballpoint pen and a notepad and wrote everything down. I put the pen and the notepad in my pocket and exited the Internet.

The line where Appleton's phone number was supposed to be had said *NP*, which meant that his number was non-published. That was okay, because I didn't plan on calling him anyway. I planned on showing up at his house unexpectedly at two o'clock in the morning.

And that's what I did.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I drove by the address and parked half a block down on the other side of the street. It wasn't a great neighborhood, but it wasn't one of the worst I'd ever been in either. Lower middle-class, I guess you would call it. Nobody around there had a lot of money, but they all had more than me.

Most of the houses had been framed with concrete blocks and finished with stucco, the materials of choice back in the 1950s when they had been built. Some of the cars in the driveways were cheap and new and disposable after fifty thousand miles, while others looked as though they might have been sold by short chubby fellows with three day beards on their faces and cheap cigars in their mouths, men who worked on gravel lots with colorful plastic pennants strung everywhere and signs that said BUY HERE/PAY HERE.

The vehicle in Trent Appleton's driveway was none of the above. In fact, it wasn't even there. Either Appleton wasn't home, or he'd pulled into the detached garage behind the house. There was a white cargo van parked at the curb that could have been his. But if it was, I wondered why he hadn't put it in the driveway.

It was 2:16 a.m., nearly twenty-two hours before the clock would strike midnight on Saturday, October 25. Nearly a full day before Everett Harbaugh would turn twenty years old. I felt pretty good about that. There seemed to be plenty of time for me to rescue Everett and have Appleton arrested for abduction and unlawful imprisonment. Eventually he would be charged with the murders of Stephanie Vowels and Philip Davenport, but kidnapping was more than enough to hold him for now. The police could work everything out once they had him in custody.

My cell phone vibrated. The caller ID said Laurie.

"Hey," I said.

"Where are you?"

"Parked across the street from the killer's house. I was just about to go over there and look around."

"The alleged killer," she said.

"Whatever. From what we know, don't you think it's pretty obvious that Trent Appleton is systematically killing the offspring generated through his sperm donations?"

"I don't know about obvious. *Likely* would be a better word, I think. So, since you know this man's name and address, I'm taking it you really did break into the sperm bank."

"I really did," I said. "And I got the information I needed. Now I'm

going to nail this guy.”

“I don’t know, Nicholas. It sounds awfully dangerous. Maybe you should just let the police handle it.”

“You saw how far I got with the police,” I said. “They’re too stupid and too slow to be of any use to me at the moment. I’m going to have to take care of this myself. When all is said and done, maybe they’ll give me a medal or something.”

“Let’s just hope they don’t hang it on your casket.”

“Don’t be such a pessimist,” I said. “I’ll be fine. My truck’s still parked at your place, by the way. Someone slashed both the rear tires. Of course I have a pretty good idea who did it.”

“What are you driving?”

“I rented a car. I’ll get some new tires for the Jimmy in the morning.”

“This is getting scary,” she said. “I can’t believe someone did that at my apartment. The parking lot is well-lit, and—”

“I told you I’m not a very lucky person,” I said. “Are you sure you still even want to hang out with me?”

“Shut up. Of course I’m sure.”

“Okay.”

She was silent for a beat. Maybe she wasn’t so sure after all, I thought. But it wasn’t that. She had something else on her mind.

“You left a beer bottle on that wobbly little fold-up table by the computer,” she said. “Edgar must have brushed by and knocked it off.”

“Was there beer in it?” I said.

“Just enough to make a big mess.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. That was careless of me. I’ll pay to have your carpet cleaned.”

“Don’t worry about it. I just wanted you to know why the place smells like a brewery now.”

“I really am sorry,” I said. “It won’t happen again.”

“At least it wasn’t milk. That would have smelled even worse.”

“Yeah. I can pretty much promise you that I’ll never spill milk in your apartment.”

She laughed. “I miss you,” she said. “I don’t suppose there’s any way I could talk you into coming on home and trying the police again in the morning, huh?”

“This is something I have to do,” I said. “I’ll be careful. I promise. With a little luck, I’ll be back at your place before the sun comes up.”

“But you said you’re not a very lucky person.”

“Sometimes I am.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep until you’re here,” she said.

I paused. I didn’t know quite what to say next. *I love you* seemed

appropriate, except for the fact that we'd only known each other for a couple of days. Was it possible to fall in love with someone in such a short amount of time? Did I love her? Did I even know what that meant anymore?

In the end, I didn't say it. I didn't want her to feel rushed into anything, or obligated to say it back.

"I better go now," I said. "I'll see you in a little while."

"Why does this feel like goodbye?"

"It's not. Believe me. I'll be there."

I disconnected, put my phone back in my pocket.

I climbed out of the Caprice and shut the door gently. I didn't want to wake any dogs. Or people either, for that matter. The .38 revolver was still holstered on my belt, hidden by my shirttails. I was hoping it would stay there, but I had a feeling it wouldn't.

I walked across the street and peeked inside the white van. The dash and the floorboard were littered with fast food bags and Styrofoam coffee cups, and there was a beanbag ashtray full of non-filtered cigarette butts on the center console. An array of hand tools and power tools had been crammed into the cargo area, saws and squares and rollers and brushes and buckets and sponges and a shop vac. It was a working van, and whoever owned it was in the business of painting and remodeling houses.

I pulled out the pen and notepad I'd borrowed from Laurie and jotted down the tag number. Just in case.

I walked up the driveway to the side of the house and stood there and listened for a minute. There were no sounds coming from inside, and all the windows were dark. I continued toward the backyard, easing through the swinging double gate and following the driveway to the garage. I looked inside and saw junk stacked to the ceiling, everything from books to garden tools. Near the top of the pile there was a child's tricycle. The streamers flowing from the handlebar grips, once red and white and bright and cheerful, were now a grimy shade of gray. The spokes were rusted, the rubber tires cracked with rot. It occurred to me that someone's life story had been crammed into the decaying one-car structure, and that perhaps the ending hadn't been an altogether happy one.

There was a small wooden deck attached to the back of the house. A cheap set of patio furniture anchored the space, and half a dozen empty flower pots and a corroded barbecue grill guarded the perimeter. I followed a series of concrete stepping stones over there, climbed up and tiptoed across ten feet or so of questionable wooden planks, cupped my hands against the sliding glass door and looked inside. No curtains, no blinds. On the other side of the door, there was a bedroom with no furniture and a man wrapped in a blanket sleeping

in the middle of the floor. I could see that he was breathing, and I could see his face. He wasn't dead, and he wasn't Everett.

I thought about picking something up and crashing through the door. The barbecue grill was within reach if I needed it, but I decided to try a more subtle approach first.

I pulled my gun out of its holster and held it behind my back with my right hand while I knocked with my left. The man jerked awake. In one fluid motion he rolled away from the blanket and jumped to a standing position and faced the back door. He had some kind of blade in his hand. It was dark, and I couldn't tell for sure, but from where I stood it looked like a steak knife.

That's when I knew he probably wasn't the man I was looking for.

"What do you want?" he shouted.

"Everett Harbaugh."

"Who's that?"

"Can I just talk to you for a minute?"

He walked over to where I was standing. He didn't put the knife down, and he didn't open the door. He wore tattered jeans and a faded red T-shirt, everything dotted with white paint. His eyes were bugged and bloodshot and his hair looked like something that might have been pulled out of a clogged drain.

"This is my place," he said. "Get on out of here."

"I don't want your place. I'm a private investigator. I'm looking for someone."

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness of the bedroom, and I could see an empty wine bottle on the floor by the blanket. He was obviously a squatter, an old drunk who'd gotten tired of sleeping in his work van.

"Get on out of here," he said again.

"Where's the man who used to live here?" I said. "Trent Appleton."

"I don't know, and I don't care."

I believed him on both counts. He didn't know where Appleton was, but I wondered if there might be a clue to Sperm Dad's whereabouts somewhere inside the house.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said. "I just want to come in and look around."

"No."

The old sot was starting to get on my nerves. I swung my right hand around and pressed the barrel of the revolver against the glass. He stared at the fat .38 caliber hole aimed at his face, and his eyes got even bugger and bloodier.

"Open the door," I said.

He held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "I don't want no trouble, mister."

“Just do as I say and you won’t have any.”

He unlocked the door and slid it open.

“I don’t mean nobody no harm,” he said. “Let me just grab my stuff and—”

“Give me the knife.”

He handed it to me, and I tossed it out onto the deck.

“I’ll do whatever you want,” he said.

“Get your blanket and go sit in the corner. This shouldn’t take long.”

He grabbed his blanket and went and sat in the corner.

I holstered my weapon and walked through the bedroom and into the hallway. The electricity was off, but the streetlights shining through the front windows made it easy enough to get around. The house was hot and it smelled like dust. I walked into the kitchen and opened all the drawers and cabinets, but everything had been cleaned out. All I found was a set of instructions for installing the hood over the stove. I looked through the living room and the other bedroom, but all the furniture had been moved out and there weren’t any convenient scraps of paper lying around with a forwarding address written on them.

I checked the bathroom last. It reeked of urine. The old drunk must have been using the toilet sometimes, even though the water had been turned off and there was no way to flush it. I opened the cabinet under the vanity, found an old blow dryer and half a bottle of Drano. There was a toothbrush in one of the drawers and a tube of Aqua-Fresh that had been squeezed to death. I figured the brush might have some DNA evidence on it, so I left it alone. Not that I would have touched it anyway. After being in that bathroom for three minutes, I felt an intense need to find a shower and scrub my body raw. I was sweaty and itchy and I knew the smell of the place would follow me out of there. It was disgusting.

I opened the medicine cabinet and found a prescription pill bottle. It was for Diazepam, the generic name for Valium. The label told someone named Nora Fetzler to take one tablet every eight hours as needed. I shook the bottle. It was empty. I put it in my pocket and walked back out to the hallway and into the bedroom where I’d started. The old wino was still sitting obediently in the corner with his blanket. I pulled a ten dollar bill out of my wallet and let it float to the floor.

“Buy yourself something to eat,” I said.

“Thanks, mister.”

“Why is your van on the street? Why don’t you park it in the driveway?”

“It’s out of gas. Someone helped me push it the last couple of

blocks, but I knew we'd never make it up into the driveway. Too heavy."

I threw down a twenty. It landed on top of the ten.

"Get yourself some gas too. Maybe you can find some work."

He smiled. There were some teeth missing in front.

"You're all right," he said. "I thought you was going to kill me."

"Take care," I said, knowing that he wouldn't.

I walked outside and took a deep breath of fresh air. I don't think I could have slept in a place like that, no matter how bad things got.

I looked at my watch. 3:27.

Time is always a matter of perspective. Time flies when you're having fun, and misery is the flipside of that. A week can go by in a flash when you're out fishing, and five minutes can seem like an eternity when you're in excruciating pain. When I'd first arrived at the address, it had felt as though I had all the time in the world to get Everett out of there. But now that I was back to not knowing where he was, the clock was my worst enemy. It was like a ticking bomb. In a little over twenty hours, Everett would turn twenty years old, and for some reason that was the age Trent Appleton had chosen to eliminate his offspring. First Stephanie Vowels, then Philip Davenport, and now Everett Harbaugh. And if Everett hadn't come to me when he did, nobody would have ever made the connection. Or maybe they would have eventually, after several more murders. Two had been enough for me. *No evidence that a crime has been committed*, Detective Fleming had said. To me, it was as obvious as the moon in the sky. Everett had been abducted, and if I didn't find him soon he was going to be dead.

At least I had a name to go on, a possible connection to Trent Appleton. I pulled the Valium bottle out of my pocket and looked at it again. Nora Fetzler. I needed a computer again, and the only one I had access to at three-thirty in the morning was at Laurie's apartment. I hated having to drive there every time I needed to look something up. Life would have been a lot easier if Shelby Spelling hadn't smeared peanut butter all over my laptop. In *The World According to Nicholas Colt*, if Everett ended up dying, Shelby should be named as an accessory. She wouldn't be, of course. I would have to dole out her punishment myself.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was after four by the time I made it back to Laurie's. She was right. It smelled like a brewery in there. She'd put some towels down on the carpet to soak up the spilled beer. Her bedroom door was closed. I didn't open it, didn't want to disturb her. I was glad that she'd been able to fall asleep. I could have used a few hours myself, but there just wasn't time. If my efforts ultimately fell short and Everett ended up dying at the hands of Trent Appleton, it wouldn't be because I hadn't tried.

I thought about making some coffee, but I didn't think it would set right with my stomach. I was still a little nauseated from the smell of the squatter's place. Coffee didn't sound good, but I was thirsty. I grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator and took it to the computer desk, careful to twist the cap back on after every sip. Edgar and I didn't need any more mishaps. We were in enough trouble already.

With the prior address on Nora Fetzler, along with her unusual last name, it didn't take me long to find out where she lived now. Unfortunately, it was all the way up in Macon, Georgia.

A four hour drive.

If I knew for a fact that Everett was there, I wouldn't have hesitated. But I didn't know, and I couldn't afford to waste a bunch of time on the road.

I did a few more searches on the computer and found Nora's home telephone number. Hers wasn't unlisted, as Trent's had been, but it was fairly new and it took me a while to find the listing. I wrote the number down on my notepad and then punched it into my cell phone. It rang for a long time. Finally, there was a click, followed by a sleepy female voice.

"Hello?" she said.

"Is this Nora Fetzler?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Sergeant William Baxley with the Georgia State Police, ma'am. I'm afraid your husband has been involved in an accident."

I heard the flint wheel of a cigarette lighter followed by the sound of Nora Fetzler inhaling and exhaling the smoke.

"There must be some mistake," she said. "I'm not married."

"Do you know a man named Trent Appleton?"

"Yes, but he's not my husband."

"There was a business card in his wallet with your name and number written on the back of it. Above your name it said *my wife*."

She laughed, and it ended in a barking cough.

"He wishes," she said. "No, we were seeing each other for a while, but he got crazy and I walked out on him a few months ago. Are you telling me he's dead now?"

"Severely injured, ma'am."

"I told him he needed to get rid of that motorcycle. I was a nervous wreck every time we went out on that thing."

"The doctors aren't sure he'll make it through the night" I said. "Do you know if Mr. Appleton has any family we could get in touch with?"

"Not really. No kids or anything. He has a brother, but he hasn't been in touch with him for years."

"I appreciate your time, ma'am. Sorry to have bothered you. Oh, just one more thing. The address on his driver's license isn't current. Do you happen to know where he was living now?"

"As far as I know, he was still in Jacksonville," she said. "His house was foreclosed on a while back, while we were still together. We stayed there as long as we could, and then we moved into a little place down in Green Cove Springs. Right there in town. It's an old house that the owner divided into apartments."

"Do you remember the address?"

"No. I was only there for a few weeks. But I can tell you which street, and what the house looks like."

She described the house and told me the name of the street it was on. I thanked her and apologized again and told her to have a good night. As soon as we said goodbye, I grabbed my bottle of drinking water and left Laurie's apartment and headed for Green Cove Springs. If Trent Appleton wasn't there, maybe one of the other residents would have some information on him. Or maybe the landlord would know something.

Appleton could have been anywhere, of course. It had been over forty-eight hours since Everett had disappeared. Appleton could have driven anywhere in the country in that amount of time. I was just hoping that he'd stayed nearby. If he'd left the area, there probably wasn't a lot I could do for Everett at this point.

I found the property without any problem. Nora had done a good job of describing the place. It was a large house on a large lot, white clapboard siding with green shutters and green trim. The porch spanned the entire width in front, and a tire on a rope hanging from a fat oak branch completed the picture of Deep South charm.

The picture was an illusion, of course, someone's nostalgic idea of a great and simple era that was probably never that great or simple in the first place. An era without automobiles or air conditioning or antibiotics. An era where people worked harder and died younger. If you can find the ones who survived, they'll tell you things were better

back then, but I'm not so sure. I like having a cell phone and a computer and a fast food joint on every corner. I like rock and roll, and I like being able to spend a weekend in Paris when I have the money. In fifty years, right now will be the good old days to someone. It's all a matter of perspective.

There was a gravel parking area on the left side of the property, but all the spots were taken. I pulled in there anyway, blocking a gray pickup truck with a topper on the back and a Harley Electra-Glide with leather saddlebags. Maybe the motorcycle belonged to Trent Appleton. Nora had mentioned that he owned one.

I climbed the steps to the porch and looked at the mailboxes. There was a button and an intercom speaker above each one, a buzzer system that allowed residents to unlock the front door remotely for visitors. Appleton was in apartment 2B. I'd finally gotten lucky. So the bike was probably his, but he must have owned another vehicle as well. I doubted that he could have kidnapped Everett with a motorcycle.

I tried the door, but of course it was locked. Also, there was an ADT Home Security sticker on the window. It might have been a bluff, but I didn't want to take any chances. If I broke into the house and tripped an alarm, the cops would come for me and Appleton might get away.

The only way for me to get inside was to buzz one of the residents and pretend to be a delivery person or something. It was too early for that, so I decided to hang back and wait a while.

I walked back to the side of the house and started writing down the tag numbers of all the vehicles parked there. If Appleton managed to get away from me, at least I would have something to go on. Something to take to the police, maybe, if they ever came to their senses. Not that I was holding my breath for that to happen.

"What are you doing?" a voice behind me said.

I turned around. A man wearing faded jeans and a black denim vest stood there with his arms crossed. He had a shaved head and a shaved face and he wore gold hoops in both ears. Late thirties or early forties, full-sleeve tats on both arms.

"Is your name Trent Appleton?" I said.

"I know you," he said, ignoring the question. "You were at Arenque's the other night."

I reached for my gun, but before I could get my hand on it he punched me in the gut with his fist and clocked me in the jaw with his elbow. Jagged bolts of electric pain exploded behind my eyeballs as my knees went limp and I fell to the ground. I didn't lose consciousness, but I might as well have. My muscles were useless. I lay there on my side and retched, the shouting throngs of pain in my stomach competing with those in my head, each proclaiming to be

number one, like bleachers full of raging stomping fans at a high school basketball game.

The guy who'd assaulted me pulled my keys out of my pocket and my revolver out of its holster, and then he kicked me in the ribs. He didn't have to do that. I was down for the count already. Maybe he just enjoyed inflicting pain on people. Whatever the case, I was in deep trouble.

And that meant Everett Harbaugh was in deep trouble.

As soon as Mr. Ribkicker had mentioned Arenque's, I knew he wasn't Trent Appleton. He was a member of the Five Points Posse. One of Fatso's guys.

I heard the electronic tones as he fingered a number into his cell.

"Hey, it's me," he said. "You still want that guy who was messing with you the other night?"

There was a pause while the other party spoke. I assumed the other party was Fatso, and I assumed he said yes.

"Then come and get him. He's at my place."

There was a single beep followed by a snap as Mr. Ribkicker disconnected and closed his flip phone.

He sat on the gravel beside me. He crossed his legs in a semi-lotus position and lit a cigarette. My rental car was behind us. If someone drove by, they wouldn't be able to see us from the road. It wasn't likely that anyone would be driving by at this time of the morning anyway. Especially a cop. You can never find one when you need one.

"What do you want?" I said.

"It's not what I want. It's what Fatso wants. And trust me. What Fatso wants, Fatso gets."

"A young man's going to die if I don't get to him in time."

"Sounds like a personal problem."

"You could help me," I said. "Think about it. You could be a hero, for once, instead of just a common thug."

He kicked me in the forehead with the heel of his boot. Not very hard, but hard enough to jack the pain inside my skull to an eleven on the zero-to-ten scale.

"Shut up," he said.

I tasted blood in my mouth. I started feeling around with my tongue and discovered a loose molar on the right side. Mr. Ribkicker had done that with his elbow. I wanted to kill him.

"You know the guy up in two-B?" I said.

"I don't know anybody."

"His name is Trent Appleton. He's already murdered at least two people. He kidnapped a young man named Everett Harbaugh, and—"

"Harbaugh. Any kin to a lawyer named Bradley Harbaugh?"

"It's his son," I said.

And as soon as I said it, I remembered the threatening emails Bradley had told me about. Realizing how badly I'd screwed up, I closed my eyes and tried to think of a way to take it back. But there wasn't any. I'd probably just signed Everett's death warrant with my big mouth.

"That lawyer screwed us over," Mr. Ribkicker said. "One of our guys went to prison because of him. Because of his incompetence. And now you're telling me someone's going to kill his son? I hope they do. I'll help them. Where do I sign up for that?"

"I don't know what kind of problem you have with Bradley Harbaugh, but his son has nothing to do with it. He's just a kid. Twenty years old."

He took a drag on his cigarette. "Life's a bitch," he said.

I heard the rumble of multiple motorcycles approaching.

"This is your last chance," I said. "Let me have my gun back, and we'll call it a day. Otherwise, I'm going to have to hurt you. Bad."

He laughed. He stood and waved the riders in. They parked somewhere nearby and cut their engines. A few seconds later, I looked up and saw Fatso's enormous belly looming over me.

"Unbelievable," he said. "You're not such a badass anymore, are you? And you're not looking so good. What's the matter? Not feeling well? I have something at the clubhouse that will perk you right up."

"We can put him in my truck," Mr. Ribkicker said. "Then I'll follow you guys back to the house."

"Excellent idea," Fatso said. "Get his car out of the way, and then go ahead and get him loaded."

I heard my keys being thrown and caught, and a few seconds later someone started the Caprice and backed it out of the parking area. Mr. Ribkicker and one of the other guys picked me up and threw me into the back of the pickup truck. The gray one with the topper. They didn't do it gently. They heaved me in there like a sack of potatoes. Mr. Ribkicker slammed the tailgate shut, and then he locked the topper's hatch with a key. He climbed into the cab and started the engine and headed out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Riding in the enclosed bed of a pickup truck is never very comfortable, even under the best of circumstances. It's bumpy and noisy and stuffy and hot. You spend the entire time looking forward to getting out. It's never a joyride, and it's especially uncomfortable after a two-hundred-and-twenty-pound Neanderthal brute beats the living shit out of you. When that happens, it's practically unbearable.

My stomach felt as though I'd swallowed something hard and cold. A paperweight or something. The pain in my head had subsided a bit, but it was still difficult to move. Like swimming in quicksand. I grunted and strained and finally managed to lift my wrist high enough to see my watch. It was a little after five. Still a couple of hours until the sun came up. Nineteen hours until Everett Harbaugh turned twenty.

Of course Trent Appleton probably wouldn't kill Everett at the stroke of midnight. But he might. I had to consider that my deadline. Everything after midnight was bonus time.

Not that it mattered much now. I probably wasn't going to be around to save Everett anyway. Fatso and crew were probably going to kill me. Game over, as they say.

I'd survived many ordeals through the years, but I couldn't imagine how I was going to get through this one. I certainly didn't have the strength to fight anyone. I was basically at the mercy of The Five Points Posse, and they didn't seem like a very merciful bunch.

You know things are bad when the best you can hope for is a quick death, but that's the way I felt. Maybe they wouldn't make it too painful. Maybe they wouldn't pulverize my kneecaps with steel pipes or yank my fingernails out with pliers. Maybe they wouldn't use my face for an ashtray or chop my fingers off with a hatchet. Maybe they would be nice and just blow my brains out with my own revolver.

We were on the road for over thirty minutes. By the time Mr. Ribkicker parked the truck and cut the engine, I was getting some feeling back in my arms and legs. I was still weak and a little dizzy, but I felt like I might be able to walk on my own.

I heard the key slide into the lock for the hatch, and seconds later the back of the truck was open and a very welcomed cool breeze was flowing in. I had no idea where we were. Somewhere in Five Points, I supposed.

"I'll make you a deal," I said. "Let me go now, and I won't kill you."

Mr. Ribkicker laughed at that. He reached in and grabbed my left ankle and pulled me toward the tailgate. I was cargo to him. An

inanimate object. I shouted a string of expletives as the unreasonably loud and throaty suicide machines pulled up beside the truck, just to let him know I was still alive.

One by one the bikes went silent and the riders dismounted. Fatso waddled up to the tailgate and conferred with Mr. Ribkicker.

"What do you think we should do with him?" Fatso said.

"It's up to you, boss. But keep in mind, he's working for that slimeball lawyer Bradley Harbaugh. I say we take him out back and —"

"Harbaugh," Fatso said. "I forgot about that. As it turns out, Mr. Harbaugh's not so bad after all. I talked to someone at his law firm yesterday. They're planning to file an appeal, and they're ninety-nine point nine percent sure they can get Dennis off on a technicality. The guy I talked to said they're in it for the duration. Said they'll handle the rest of the case pro bono."

"What does that mean?" Mr. Ribkicker said.

"It means Dennis doesn't have to give them any more money. It means they're his friends. It also means that Mr. Colt here lucked out."

Mr. Ribkicker looked disappointed.

I was lying on my side with my feet at the edge of the tailgate. I mustered enough strength to sit up. My vision was a little blurry, but I could see that there were three other gang members in addition to Fatso and Mr. Ribkicker. They were standing off to the side smoking a joint.

"I need to get back to Green Cove Springs," I said. "The man who kidnapped Everett Harbaugh lives in the same house with pretty boy here. His name is Trent Appleton."

Fatso turned back to Mr. Ribkicker. "This guy he's talking about live in your building?"

"I don't know, boss. I don't pay any attention to stuff like that."

"He's in apartment two-B," I said. "I saw his name on the mailbox."

"I reckon we need to give him a visit then," Fatso said.

This was working out way better than I'd anticipated. Maybe I hadn't signed Everett's death warrant with my big mouth after all. Maybe I'd issued his pardon.

I insisted that Fatso drive the truck back to Green Cove Springs. I didn't want to ride with Mr. Ribkicker, even if he was supposed to be on my side now. Even after he gave my gun back and apologized and tried to shake my hand. I didn't want anything to do with him.

I sat up front in the cab this time. The pickup actually leaned to the left when Fatso scooted in behind the steering wheel. For a minute I thought it was going to roll over onto its side. There was a half a pack of Kool Super Longs on the dash. I helped myself to one, used the truck's lighter to get it going.

I looked around and got my bearings and figured out what side of town we were on. It didn't make much sense, but I didn't say anything about it.

"Sorry again about the misunderstanding," Fatso said. "Sydney gets a little overenthusiastic sometimes."

"Sydney. That's his name?"

"Yeah. He's all right. You'll see."

"He knocked one of my teeth loose," I said.

"I know someone who can fix it for you. Soon as all this is over. Okay?"

"I have my own dentist, but thanks. Maybe I'll just send Mr. Ribkicker the bill."

Fatso had said that his name was Sydney, but he would always be Mr. Ribkicker to me.

And he would always be on my shit list.

"What makes you so sure this Trent Appleton guy has Everett?" Fatso said.

I told him about the research I'd done on the Siblings Boards website. About Stephanie Vowels and Philip Davenport.

"There's no way that's a coincidence," I said. "They both came from the same donor number, and they both died on their twentieth birthday. Everett's next. There's no doubt in my mind."

"Yet the police wouldn't help you. That's amazing."

"Seems that way to me too. They said there was no evidence that a crime had been committed. They're idiots."

"I've been saying that for years," Fatso said.

We made it back to the address in Green Cove Springs. My Caprice was parked on the street in front of the house. Everything looked the same, except there was a newspaper on the front steps now. It was dark and quiet. Everyone was still asleep. Fatso steered the pickup into the open slot where it had been parked previously, and Mr. Ribkicker and the other three hoodlums rolled in a few seconds later. I climbed out of the truck. A dog barked in the distance.

Fatso got out and walked around to where I was standing. Mr. Ribkicker joined us, while the others stayed by the bikes and passed around another joint.

"What's the plan?" Fatso said.

"He's up in two-B," I said. "I think the three of us should just bust on in there like a SWAT team. Your stoners over there can wait outside in case Appleton gets away from us."

"How's he going to get away from us?" Mr. Ribkicker said. "There's no back door in these units, and I don't think he's going to jump out the window. It's about a twenty-foot drop."

"He probably won't get away, but I like to plan for contingencies."

He might have a rope ladder. If I was a kidnapper and a murderer living on the second floor, I would have one. He might have a bazooka in there for all I know. Or a machinegun. That's why I want to take him by surprise. I'm hoping he won't have time to react."

"There's safety in numbers," Mr. Ribkicker said. "I say we all go up there. All six of us."

"We'll do it Colt's way," Fatso said. "Grab the shotgun."

Mr. Ribkicker shrugged. "All right, boss. Whatever you say."

He opened the passenger's side door of the pickup truck, reached behind the seat and pulled out a pump-action shotgun. It was an angry-looking weapon, with a pistol grip and a vented barrel and a ribbed fore stock. For some reason, I doubted that it had ever been used for skeet shooting or hunting.

Mr. Ribkicker racked a shell into the chamber.

"Let's do this thing," he said.

Fatso instructed the other guys to spread out around the perimeter of the property. They seemed happy to comply. Actually, they just seemed happy. Period.

Fatso, Mr. Ribkicker and I walked around to the front of the house and mounted the porch. Mr. Ribkicker lived there, so of course he had a key to the door. He slid it in and opened the deadbolt. The three of us walked inside. There was an ADT keypad on the wall by the door, its flashing red LED letting us know that we had sixty seconds before the alarm sounded.

The sticker on the window wasn't a bluff after all. It was a good thing I hadn't tried to pick the lock. Mr. Ribkicker punched in the code, and then he and his twelve-gauge led the way up the stairs.

I pulled my .38 from its holster, held it ready at my side.

As far as I could tell, Fatso was unarmed.

"Step aside," he said.

Mr. Ribkicker stepped out of the way, and Fatso rammed the door with his shoulder. He put all his weight into it. The jamb splintered and before I knew it we were inside the apartment and Mr. Ribkicker was shouting for the man standing there in boxer shorts to get on the floor. He didn't have to say it twice.

Appleton lay facedown with his hands laced behind his head. It seemed that he knew the drill. A quick look around told me that he was alone in the apartment.

"I'm clean," he said. "I swear, man, I haven't touched the stuff for six months. No smack, no oxy, nothing."

He thought we were narcotics officers. I decided to let him go on thinking it.

"Bullshit," I said. "Tell us where your stash is, or we're going to tear this place apart."

“Go ahead and tear it apart. You won’t find anything here.”

I gave my newfound friends a nod, and they went to work. I didn’t care if Appleton had any drugs or not. I just wanted to put some fear into him, and of course I wanted to find Everett. Maybe he was tied and gagged in a closet, or under the bed or something.

I stood there with my foot on Appleton’s back and my gun aimed at his head while Fatso and Mr. Ribkicker searched the apartment. It was a small pad, one bedroom and a kitchen and a living room and a bathroom. Fatso and Mr. Ribkicker made a nice show of turning the place upside down. They threw books from shelves and cushions from chairs and pots and pans from the kitchen cabinets. Mr. Ribkicker used a switchblade to slice open the ottoman. He pulled the stuffing out and threw it on the floor. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

When they were finished with everything, they met back in the living room. My foot was still resting on Appleton’s lumbar vertebrae, and my gun was still pointed at his head.

Fatso held up a zippered plastic bag with a syringe and a spoon and three squares of aluminum foil in it.

“This is all I found,” he said.

I took the bag from him and stuffed it into my back pocket.

“You checked the closets?” I said.

“Of course.”

“What about the attic?”

“There’s no access to the attic from this apartment,” Appleton said.

I dropped to one knee and pressed the barrel of my .38 against the back of his skull.

“Where’s Everett Harbaugh?” I said.

“Who?”

“Your offspring. The third child generated from your dealings with Klein Fertility a couple of decades ago. I know about Stephanie Vowels and Philip Davenport. Tell me where Everett is, or I’m going to splatter your brains all over this floor.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I pressed down harder with the gun barrel, digging the front sight into his scalp. Blood trickled down the side of his neck and dripped on the cheap area rug beneath him.

“I’m talking about murder, asshole. You killed Stephanie and Philip on their twentieth birthday, and you’re planning to do the same to Everett. The more you try to deny it, the worse this is going to go for you.”

“You talking about that website?” he said. “The Sibling Boards?”

“Yeah. That’s where I put two and two together. From there, it only took a minimal amount of research and deductive reasoning. It’s over, Trent. You can die today, or you can start rotting in a jail cell today.

It's up to you. I know it's not much of a choice, but one way or another, you're going to—"

"I registered on that site out of curiosity," he said. "Just to see how many kids my sperm produced. I'm on there anonymously. I haven't had any contact with any of those people."

"Right," I said. "So it's just a coincidence that Stephanie and Philip share your DNA, and it's just a coincidence that they were killed the day they turned twenty, and it's just a coincidence that Everett, who also shares your DNA, went missing four days before *he* turned twenty. That's a lot of coincidences, Trent. Wouldn't you say so?"

"Go ahead and arrest me. I'm not saying anything else without my attorney being present. I have rights, and you're not going to treat me like a piece of dirt. Even if I am on probation."

"Here's a newsflash for you, Trent. We're not cops. I'm a private investigator, and my friends here are members of a motorcycle gang. So we can't arrest you, and we're not overly concerned about your rights at this point."

"I'm going to sue every last one of you," he said.

"You're not going to sue anyone. You'll be lucky to make it through the day alive. Just tell me where Everett is, and I'll hand you over to the police. They'll go a lot easier on you than we will. I can promise you that."

"I don't know anyone named Everett. I didn't kidnap anyone, and I didn't kill anyone. And that's the truth."

"Let's take him to the clubhouse," Mr. Ribkicker said. "If he knows anything, we'll get it out of him."

"Is that what you want?" I said to Appleton. "You want these guys to have a go at you? Personally, I'm opposed to torture as a means of interrogation, but it's almost like we don't have a choice with you. Just tell me what I want to know now, and you can avoid a world of hurt."

"If I knew anything, I would tell you," he said.

"I'm going to give you one more chance," I said. "And then I'm going to turn you over to Fatso and his friend here. Where is he, Trent? Where is Everett Harbaugh?"

He didn't say anything. He started sobbing like a little kid. Mr. Ribkicker kicked him in the thigh with the toe of his boot, and he started sobbing even louder.

"How do you want to handle this?" Fatso said.

"Let's get him outside and into the truck while it's still dark," I said. "Did you guys find any rope or duct tape or anything while you were tossing the place?"

Fatso thought about it. "Be right back," he said.

Mr. Ribkicker lit a cigarette. He offered me one, and I took it.

Another Kool Super Long. The smoke was thick and cold and it made me cough. He pulled out a small bag of weed and loaded some into the bowl of a glass pipe, what they call a carburetor. He lit the bowl and took a long drag and passed it to me. I don't usually partake, but I needed something to steady my nerves. I took one hit and then passed it back to Mr. Ribkicker. He finished it off, tapped the ashes out and put the pipe back into his vest pocket.

Fatso returned with a spool of dental floss and a box of trash bags and a roll of Scotch tape. He used the floss to tie Appleton's hands behind his back. He looped it around about a dozen times and tied it tight, and then he did the same with his ankles.

"What are the trash bags for?" I said.

"I thought we'd wrap him up. Just in case someone rides by or looks out a window while we're loading him into the truck."

"I have a better idea. Let's just roll him up into the rug and carry him out that way. I saw it on a movie one time."

"That'll work," Fatso said.

He pulled a red bandana out of his back pocket and forced it into Appleton's mouth. He secured it by wrapping Scotch tape around his head several times. He and Mr. Ribkicker positioned Appleton to one side of the rug and rolled him up inside it, like the cream filling inside a Ho Ho.

Not a great comparison, but I was hungry, and a Ho Ho sounded good. Or a Twinkie. A Twinkie and a cup of coffee would have been splendid.

Mr. Ribkicker knotted some trash bags together and used them to tie the rug in three places.

"I think we're ready," he said.

"I need to take a leak before we go," Fatso said.

While Fatso was in the bathroom, I took one of the trash bags to the pantry and foraged for something to eat. There wasn't much. I grabbed a box of saltines and a bag of beef jerky, and I found a six-pack of Mountain Dew in the refrigerator. I stuffed a few of the crackers into my mouth and chugged one of the soft drinks before leaving the kitchen.

By the time I got back to the living room, Fatso and Mr. Ribkicker were carrying Trent Appleton out the door.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ironically, The Five Points Posse's clubhouse was not in Five Points. It was on the Westside, not far from Laurie's apartment. I followed Fatso and the guys in my rented Caprice. I ate some more crackers and some beef jerky and I drank another Mountain Dew. The marijuana Mr. Ribkicker had turned me on to was some of the most potent I'd ever run across. I hadn't smoked any weed in a long time, so I didn't have much tolerance for it. One hit, and I was stoned to the bone. It had given me a severe case of the munchies, and it had made me sleepy. The caffeine in the soda helped me stay alert, but I knew it would only go so far. I was going to need some sleep soon, or something stronger to keep me awake.

Mr. Ribkicker backed the pickup truck into the driveway and opened the garage door remotely. I pulled in behind him. Fatso parked his Harley on the yard. The other three guys didn't show up. I guess Fatso gave them the rest of the day off.

I climbed out of the car and walked up to the garage. Mr. Ribkicker had already opened the tailgate and the hatch to the topper. He and Fatso were standing there waiting. Trent Appleton was still rolled up inside the rug. The three of us carried him inside, and then Mr. Ribkicker hit the switch to close the door.

"You think he's still alive?" Fatso said.

"He better be," I said. "If he dies, Everett dies."

I didn't know that for sure, but I figured it was a safe bet. When you're dealing with a cunning sociopath, you have to think like a cunning sociopath. Everett was probably hidden in a place where nobody would ever find him. An abandoned warehouse or a storage unit or a boarded-up gas station. He was probably bound and gagged, starved and dehydrated, knowing death was coming and hoping it would hurry up. The only way to save him was to make Appleton talk.

Mr. Ribkicker cut the trash bags with his switchblade and unrolled the rug with his foot. Appleton was naked except for the boxer shorts. He had a panicked look on his face, and his lips were blue.

"Get the rag out of his mouth," Fatso said.

Mr. Ribkicker cut the tape and pulled out the red bandana. Appleton started wheezing, gasping for breath. His body was beaded with sweat, and he was shivering all over.

"You ready to tell me where Everett Harbaugh is?" I said.

He shook his head. "I don't know where he is."

"If you don't tell me, my friends are going to do very bad things to you. You will break, eventually, so you might as well save yourself the

agony.”

He started sobbing again. “I can’t tell you what I don’t know,” he said.

I decided to try a different approach. Appleton was a junkie. The three squares of aluminum foil in his plastic bag were wrapped around three balls of black tar heroin. As a musician, I’d seen it plenty of times. It was the cheapest stuff you could get on the street, and addicts longed for it like babies long for milk from their mother.

“When was the last time you had a shot?” I said.

“Last night. Right before I went to bed.”

“I have your stuff out in my car.”

“I need it,” he said. “I’ll die if I don’t have it.”

“You won’t die, but you’ll be very uncomfortable. You’ll sweat and shake and vomit and hallucinate. So maybe that’s the answer to getting you to talk. We’ll just leave you here in the garage for a while. I’ve seen guys go cold turkey before. It’s not a pretty sight.”

“I need my shot,” he said.

“I know you do, Trent. But you’re not going to get it until you tell me where Everett Harbaugh is.”

“I can’t feel my fingers,” he said. “Please untie my hands.”

“I’ll untie you and get you some clothes, and I’ll bring your smack in so you can shoot up. But first you have to tell me what I need to know.”

Mr. Ribkicker walked to the workbench on the other side of the garage. He grabbed a propane torch and a metal striker to light it with.

“This is bullshit,” he said.

He opened the valve on the torch and squeezed the striker, and a blue flame appeared at the end of the nozzle.

“What are you going to do?” I said.

“I’m going to start with the pinky toe on his left foot. I’m going to roast it like a marshmallow, make it all bubbly and black. If he still won’t talk, I’ll move on to the next toe. And the next. Then, when I run out of toes, I’ll do the whole left foot. Then I’ll start on the right side.”

Mr. Ribkicker knelt down at Trent Appleton’s feet. Appleton started bucking and thrashing and turning side to side and screaming.

“Please,” he said. “Please don’t hurt me.”

“Stuff that rag back in his mouth,” Mr. Ribkicker said. “And hold him down for me.”

As much as I wanted to find Everett Harbaugh, I didn’t think burning Trent Appleton’s feet off was the answer. People being tortured will say all kinds of things, just to make the pain stop. Appleton might give up Everett’s location, or he might send me on a

wild goose chase. If he gave me some bogus information about Everett's whereabouts, it would only waste more time. Time that Everett didn't have. I wanted to try withholding Appleton's dope for a while. If that didn't work, I doubted anything else would either.

"Let's just slow down for a minute," I said. "We'll leave him out here and let him sweat for a while. Once he starts jonesing bad enough, he'll talk. I guarantee it."

Fatso ignored me. He sat on the floor and stuffed the bandana back into Appleton's mouth. My heart skipped a beat, and then it started pounding against my chest wall like a mallet. I didn't want this to happen.

"Hold him down," Mr. Ribkicker said.

"Not a problem."

Fatso straddled Appleton and held his legs down with his hands. Fatso's enormous rear end was resting on Appleton's stomach, and Appleton looked like he might pass out before the torture session ever got started.

But he didn't.

Mr. Ribkicker held the flame on the pinky toe of Appleton's left foot. The bandana in Appleton's mouth muffled his screams, but the sound coming from his gut seeped through horrifically, like some kind of large animal caught in the bone-crunching teeth of a steel trap. In a matter of seconds, the toe went from pink to red to blister-white.

At that point, Mr. Ribkicker shut the flame off.

"Don't want to burn it too much," he said. "It'll kill all the nerve endings. If he won't talk now, I'll go ahead and blacken that toe and move on to the next one."

Fatso climbed off, turned around and pulled out the bandana. A series of high-pitched gurgling sounds escaped through Appleton's clenched teeth. His neck muscles were strained and corded.

"Where's the Harbaugh kid?" Fatso said.

Appleton shook his head frantically. His nose was running and his eyes were full of tears.

"I don't know," he said. "Please. I can't stand this anymore."

"You think that hurt?" Mr. Ribkicker said. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

He fired up the torch again.

Appleton couldn't stand it anymore, and neither could I.

"Turn it off," I said.

Mr. Ribkicker looked up at me.

"What?" he said.

"You heard me. Turn it off."

He laughed. "Who died and made you boss?"

Fatso remained quiet during this exchange. He seemed to be taking

a neutral stance on the matter.

“It’s my case,” I said. “So I’ll conduct it as I see fit.”

“Sorry, but I don’t take orders from—”

“Kill the torch,” I said, and this time I said it behind the cocked hammer of my .38 caliber revolver.

He closed the valve on the propane tank. The flame went out.

Then, just as I was thinking I had control of the situation, Mr. Ribkicker rose and started walking toward me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I aimed the gun a foot or so wide of Mr. Ribkicker's left shoulder and pulled the trigger. A deafening boom rang out, and the water heater in the back corner of the garage suddenly sprung a leak.

"The next one's going in your heart," I said.

Mr. Ribkicker raised his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"All right," he said. "You win. You don't want our help anymore, we'll be glad to step aside. Isn't that right, boss?"

"You owe me a water heater," Fatso said. "Now get out of my garage, and take your junkie with you."

That's what I intended to do. I was starting to get the feeling I'd made a huge mistake. If Appleton knew Everett's location, he would have given it up by now. Appleton wasn't a spy or a government agent. He hadn't been trained in guarding information. He was just a regular guy. A street punk. A junkie. I'd pegged him as a cold, calculating killer, but I was having second thoughts about all of that now. Mr. Ribkicker had inflicted a lot of pain on him. If he had known anything, he would have talked.

"Don't get me wrong," I said. "I appreciate your help, but—"

"You still here?" Fatso said.

I held the gun on Mr. Ribkicker.

"Untie him," I said.

Mr. Ribkicker reached into his pocket and pulled out the switchblade. He knelt down and turned Appleton on his side and cut the dental floss binding his wrists and ankles.

"There," he said. "You happy now?"

Appleton was free, but I didn't want to drive him home naked. He and Mr. Ribkicker looked to be about the same size.

I told Mr. Ribkicker to take his clothes off.

"What?" he said.

"Just do it."

Mr. Ribkicker emptied his pockets. He handed his wallet and his keys and his bag of weed and the knife to Fatso. He almost forgot the little glass pipe. The carburetor. He pulled that out last and then took his boots and jeans and the black denim vest off and tossed them on the floor.

Appleton put the pants on first, gingerly guiding his burnt toe through on the left side, and then the vest.

"I need to put something on this," Appleton said, referring to the toe. It looked like a large white grape. A glimmering thread of pus oozed from a split in the skin on top.

I turned to Fatso. "Got a first-aid kit around here?" I said.

"Nope."

I figured he was lying, but I didn't want to push it. There was a stack of clean shop towels and some duct tape on the work bench where Mr. Ribkicker had gotten the propane torch. I instructed Fatso to wrap Appleton's foot, and he did. He actually did a nice job.

"Me and Mr. Appleton are going to walk out of here now," I said. "I won't bother you guys anymore."

"What about my water heater?" Fatso said.

"Send me a bill."

Mr. Ribkicker hit the switch to open the garage door. As it rose, the morning sun beamed in brightly. I helped Appleton to his feet. It was painful for him to ambulate, but he managed by keeping his knee stiff and stepping on his heel. We climbed into the Caprice and I started the engine and backed out of the driveway.

I figured it would be a good idea to stay away from Five Points and this part of the west side and Arenque's Bar and Grill for a while. Maybe forever.

I navigated through the subdivision, made it out to the highway and took a right. As I drove, I started wondering where I was going to go from here with my investigation. I was back to square one. At first, I supposed I would resume where I'd left off, with the list Shelby Spelling had put together of the places Everett had been over the past few weeks. Then I started thinking about Stephanie Vowels and Philip Davenport, how they shared Appleton's biology and how they both died on their twentieth birthday. I still couldn't believe that was a coincidence. Someone must have set Appleton up. Someone must have tried to frame him. One of the other siblings, maybe. There were thirty all together. So, if I took Everett and Stephanie and Philip out of the equation, it left me with twenty-seven suspects. And it was going on eight o'clock, which meant there were only sixteen more hours until my deadline of midnight. There was no way to narrow it down in that amount of time. There had to be another answer, but my mind was fuzzy with fatigue and marijuana and I couldn't think of what it could possibly be. I needed to get some sleep, at least an hour or two.

"My foot is killing me," Appleton said.

"Sorry. I didn't want that to happen. I tried to stop it."

"You didn't try hard enough. Where's my dope?"

"In the glove compartment," I said.

He reached in and grabbed his bag of supplies.

"Pull over somewhere," he said. "I can't do this while the car's moving."

Pulling over was not a great idea. It was broad daylight, and we were on a busy street, and the Caprice didn't have tinted windows. I

thought about making him wait for his fix until we got back to his apartment, but I decided I'd put him through enough torment for one day. Especially since I was almost certain now that he was innocent.

I pulled into the parking lot of an all-you-can-eat buffet that had gone out of business. I steered around to the back of the building and parked in the little alcove where the dumpster used to be.

"How's this?" I said.

"Peachy. Let me see your lighter."

I handed him my Zippo. He opened the plastic bag and pulled out one of the squares of aluminum foil and the hypodermic and the spoon. He set the needle on the dashboard. It was an insulin syringe with an orange plunger and an orange cap, and I could see that it had been used before. He opened the foil and dropped the heroin onto the spoon, a little glob about the size of a jalapeño seed. It was black and gooey, like roofing tar. He grabbed the bottle of water I'd brought from Laurie's and poured a few drops over the dope. He sparked the lighter, set it on the center console, and held the spoon over the flame until the heroin melted and the water started to bubble. He pulled the cap from the syringe with his teeth, dipped the needle into the hot solution, and drew back on the plunger with his thumb. The brown liquid filled the barrel about halfway. He set the needle back on the dash, took the cap out of his mouth and dropped it into the plastic bag.

There was a length of rubber tubing in the bag. He pulled that out and tied it tightly around his left arm and squeezed his fist until the veins bulged out. He picked up the syringe and guided it to the bend of his arm, over one of the largest veins, and pierced the skin. He got a blood return on the first stick. He knew what he was doing. He was an expert. He untied the tourniquet with his teeth and pushed the plunger and slowly administered the injection. In a matter of seconds, his expression went from one of extreme distress to one of extreme relief.

I've never tried heroin myself, but some of my musician friends back in the day were addicts. I recognized the immediate effect. I'd seen it many times before.

Appleton recapped the needle and put everything back inside the plastic bag. He rolled the bag up and folded it over and stuffed it into the inside pocket of Mr. Ribkicker's vest.

"Can I drive now?" I said.

"Yeah. Let's get out of here. You got a cigarette?"

I handed him a Marlboro, and he used my Zippo to fire it up. He snapped the lighter shut and started to put it in his pocket.

"That's mine," I said.

"Sorry. Force of habit."

He smiled and handed the lighter back. He seemed to be in a better mood now. I put the car in reverse and turned my head toward the rear window to back out of the alcove.

Unfortunately, there was a police car blocking my way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I put the car back in PARK and switched off the ignition.

“What are you doing?” Appleton said.

“There’s a cop behind us.”

“Shit.”

I kept my eyes on the rearview mirror. The officer climbed out of his car and walked toward the Caprice. It was a sheriff’s deputy. Along with the green polyester uniform, which had always looked uncomfortable to me, he wore a pair of aviator glasses and a try-me scowl. His right hand rested on the butt of his 9mm semi-automatic service pistol.

I rolled down the window as he approached.

“This is private property,” he said. “You didn’t see the signs? All unattended vehicles will be towed at owner’s expense. You want me to call for a truck?”

My car hadn’t been left unattended, but I didn’t think it would be in my best interest to argue the point.

“I was just leaving, officer,” I said.

He was about five-six and thin as a politician’s promises. He probably didn’t weigh more than a hundred and forty pounds, gun included. His nametag said Turrow.

“Step out of the vehicle,” he said.

“Sir?”

“Step out of the vehicle,” he said again, only louder this time.

“Okay,” I said. “No need to shout.”

I opened the door and climbed out of the car. When I did, he must have seen the makeshift bandage on Appleton’s foot.

“Is you passenger injured?” he said.

“It’s nothing.”

He glanced inside the car, and then turned back to me.

“I need to see your driver’s license and proof of insurance,” he said.

I pulled out my wallet and handed him my credentials, including my PI license and my concealed weapons permit. I didn’t want him to get anxious if he happened to see the impression of the .38 through my shirt.

He stood there grinning and shaking his head, as if I’d given him something inappropriate. A five dollar bribe or something.

“Is there a problem, officer?”

“Turn around and put your hands on the top of the car.”

“I don’t under—”

“You going to argue with me? Turn around and put your hands on

the top of the car. Now!"

I turned around and put my hands on the top of the car. He grabbed my left wrist and slapped a cuff on it, and then he did the same with my right. He reached under my shirt and pulled my revolver out of its holster.

"Am I being arrested?" I said.

"Right now you're being held for questioning. One of our detectives has been looking for you."

"Which one?" I said, although I had a pretty good idea.

"Just hang tight, Colt. I'm going to call him and see what he wants me to do."

He turned back toward his police car, but then he decided to walk around to the passenger's side of the Caprice. Appleton was still working on the Marlboro I'd given him. His window was already halfway down.

"Good afternoon, officer," he said.

Not only did Appleton get the time of day wrong. His speech was slurred, and his pupils were constricted. I hadn't seen them myself, but I knew that they were. It's one of the side effects of a drug like heroin, and one that law enforcement officers are trained to look for.

At that moment, I could have strangled Trent Appleton, because at that moment I knew for a fact that the two of us would be spending the weekend in jail.

"I need you to step out of the vehicle," Officer Turrow said.

"I got a bum foot, sir. I can't stand very well."

"What happened to your foot?"

"I was kind of drunk last night, messing around with the barbecue grill. Dropped a red hot chunk of charcoal on my toe. My friend Nicholas was taking me over to the hospital to have it looked at."

"Sure," Turrow said. "And just how did you and your friend Nicholas end up here in this parking lot?"

"Well, it's kind of embarrassing," Appleton said. "I had to take a pee. Just couldn't hold it anymore."

I had to hand it to him. He was a pretty good liar. But then most addicts are.

"I still need you to step out of the vehicle," Turrow said. "I won't make you stand up very long. I promise."

Appleton opened the door and grunted his way to a standing position. He almost fell sideways.

"Sorry," he said. "I guess I'm still a little drunk."

"What's your name?"

"Trent Appleton."

"Got some ID?"

"No, sir. I must have left it at home."

Officer Turrow extended his index finger and poked at the left side of Mr. Ribkicker's black denim vest. The bulge there was as obvious as a pink flamingo. Appleton might as well have been wearing a sign that said *I HAVE DRUGS!*

"What's this?" Turrow said.

"Just some personal items," Appleton said.

"Mind if I take a look?"

"Actually, yes. I do mind."

Ashwally. Appleton was stoned out of his gourd.

Turrow folded his arms over his chest. "I need you to turn around and put your hands on top of the car," he said.

"No, sir. I'm refusing to be searched. This ain't Russia. You can't just —"

"Shut up. You ever heard of a little thing called probable cause? Your speech is slurred and you can't maintain your balance and your eyes have *messed up* written all over them. I have reason to believe that you are in possession of an illegal substance. Now, you can either cooperate and do as I say, or I can put your ass on the ground. You have about two seconds to make up your mind."

"Well, shit," Appleton said.

He turned around and put his hands on the top of the car. Turrow patted him down, and then he reached inside the vest and pulled out the plastic bag full of goodies.

"Well, well, well. Look what we have here," the officer said.

"That's not mine," Appleton said. "I don't know where that came from. These aren't even my clothes."

"Wait here. If you try to run, I will shoot you."

"How am I going to run with this foot?"

It was a good point.

Turrow walked over to his cruiser and grabbed another set of handcuffs. He put them on Appleton and read him his rights, escorted him to the police car and helped him into the backseat.

I felt bad for Appleton. He'd said he was on probation, and this was not going to go well for him. I almost felt responsible. If Fatso and Mr. Ribkicker and I hadn't busted into his apartment earlier this morning, he would be kicking back and getting high and eating a bowl of cereal about now. Instead, he was probably looking at some hard time.

I felt bad, but there was nothing I could do for him. And I had problems of my own. Technically, Turrow could charge me with aiding and abetting. Or some such crap. Just for driving Appleton around while he was carrying. It's insane, but it happens.

Turrow stood outside his cruiser and called someone on a cell phone. He talked for a few minutes, and then he walked back over to me.

"You want to join your friend in the backseat over there?" he said.

"Not really."

"All right. You can stand here if you want. Just don't try to make a run for it."

"Because if I do, you will shoot me?"

"Just don't press your luck."

I stood there for fifteen or twenty minutes. Finally, a maroon Chevy Lumina with black windows and a long radio antenna pulled into the lot and parked beside the deputy's car. The driver's door opened, and a man wearing brown slacks and a wrinkled white shirt climbed out. Average height, bald on top, well fed. His tie was the same color as a lemon. Maybe a little yellower. I doubted he was married. A woman wouldn't have allowed him to leave the house looking like that.

He talked to Turrow for a minute, and then he walked over to where I was standing.

"Turn around," he said.

I turned around, and he took the handcuffs off.

"I think you already know my name," I said. "Am I supposed to guess yours?"

"Barry Fleming. Pleased to meet you. Come on over to my car and we'll chat for a minute."

His eyes were bloodshot. I had a feeling he might have had a few too many cocktails at dinner last night. I followed him over to the Lumina. He opened the passenger's side door for me, and I climbed inside. He walked around and took a seat behind the wheel.

"I didn't know that fellow had drugs on him," I said. "I was just giving him a ride to the hospital."

"I'm not stupid, Colt. So don't play me. Okay?"

I shrugged. "Whatever you say, detective."

"Yeah. Anyway, I don't care about any of that. I've been looking for you, and I think you know why."

"I don't have a clue," I said.

"Someone broke into the sperm bank over in Orange Park last night. I guess you're going to tell me you don't know anything about that."

"Did they make a deposit?" I said. "Or a withdrawal?"

"Anyone ever tell you that you're a smartass?"

"Better than being a dumbass, I guess."

He massaged his temples. Last night's booze and I were giving him a headache.

"I can arrest you for the shit your friend had in the bag," he said. "You know that, right?"

"First of all, he's not my friend. He's just an acquaintance. I was giving him a ride. And if you arrest me, who's going to look for Everett Harbaugh? I'm assuming you're still not interested."

“I never said I wasn’t interested. I said there was no evidence that a crime had been committed. And there’s still not. Not where Harbaugh is concerned. But a crime *was* committed at Klein Fertility last night, and the techs lifted a ton of fingerprints early this morning. We should know later today if they match up with the people who work there. If I find out any of them are yours, even a partial one, I’m going to nail your ass to the wall.”

“Are we done here?” I said. “Because I’m getting really bored with this. And frankly, I have work to do.”

“You can leave, Colt. But I have a feeling we’ll be seeing each other again soon.”

I climbed out and walked over to my rental car and headed for Laurie’s.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I didn't bother telling Detective Barry Fleming that Trent Appleton was the sperm donor I'd been looking for. That he was, in fact, Everett Harbaugh's biological father. It wouldn't have served any purpose except to get me in trouble. Klein Fertility was the only place I could have gotten that information, and I was already a prime suspect for the breaking and entering charge. I certainly didn't want to stoke the fire that I might eventually be cooked over.

I was glad I'd taken the time to stop at the pharmacy and buy some gloves. My fingerprints are on file with the FBI. It's one of the requirements for obtaining a private investigator's license in the state of Florida. Touching anything at that sperm bank would have been tantamount to signing my name on the wall. As it was, I figured I would be okay. Unless they vacuumed for hairs and spent a million dollars on DNA testing and all that. But they wouldn't. Not on a B and E, especially one where nobody got hurt. I hadn't even stolen anything.

Anyway, Appleton was innocent, so none of that even mattered anymore. Tracking him down had been a waste of time.

It was nine-thirty by the time I made it back to Laurie's. I quietly unlocked the deadbolt with the key she'd given me, thinking she might still be in bed. She wasn't. She was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the paper and eating a bowl of cornflakes. I walked over and gave her a kiss.

"You want something to eat?" she said.

"No, thanks. I had some beef jerky and a box of saltine crackers and a gallon or two of Mountain Dew for breakfast."

She laughed. "What have you been up to all night?"

It took me about fifteen minutes to tell her everything that had happened. I told her about the fight I'd almost gotten into at the rental car place, and about the close call with the cop at Klein Fertility. I told her about the squatter at Trent Appleton's former residence, and about Nora Fetzler, the ex-girlfriend up in Georgia. I told her about finding Appleton's current residence and getting beat up by Mr. Ribkicker, about being abducted by Fatso and crew and thinking they were going to kill me, about the big turnaround where they helped me snatch Appleton from his apartment, and about me eventually saying thanks but no thanks to their interrogation techniques.

Laurie ate a second bowl of cereal and drank some orange juice while I talked. Finally, I told her about Appleton being arrested for possession of narcotics.

"And now, I'm basically back where I started," I said. "I've been through the wringer, and I'm no closer to finding Everett Harbaugh than I was when I left the apartment last night."

Laurie got up and took her cereal bowl and juice glass to the sink. She started rinsing some things and putting them in the dishwasher.

"You're not *exactly* back where you started," she said. "You're pretty sure Trent Appleton is innocent, but you're thinking someone might be trying to frame him. Right? That's something, at least."

"Yeah. Another month or two of detective work and I might be able to narrow it down. I'll figure everything out about the time Everett's body turns up in a shallow grave somewhere."

"So you're still thinking whoever has Everett is going to kill him on his twentieth birthday?"

"I think so. If someone's trying to frame Appleton, then it only makes sense that Everett's murder would be consistent with the others."

"Any suspects?" she said.

"A bunch of them. Too many. But not one that really stands out at this point. I was so sure that it was the donor father. I was positive. I put all my eggs in that basket, which of course turned out to be a huge mistake. Now, like I said, I'm pretty much back to square one."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I don't know," I said. "I need to lie down and shut my eyes for a while."

She walked over and stood behind my chair and started rubbing my shoulders with her fingers. She was very good at it.

"I'll go do some shopping and let you sleep," she said. "How does that sound?"

"Okay."

Normally, I would have invited her to come to bed with me, and I would have kissed her and held her and made love to her in the morning light. Part of me wanted to, the part that wasn't on the brink of total physical and mental exhaustion. But the tank was empty. I was running on fumes. A sleek and beautiful racecar named Desire had gotten lapped by a rusty bucket of bolts named Fatigue, and the latter managed to take the checkered flag this time. It wasn't even a close race.

I kissed Laurie and walked to the bedroom, took my clothes off and climbed under the sheets. I needed a shower, but I didn't have the energy. You know you're exhausted when you can't even muster enough strength to wash yourself. I was beat. I was as tired as I'd ever been in my life, and I was completely disillusioned with the circumstances of this case.

And with life.

And with myself.

Nothing seemed to make sense anymore.

I'd given up music fourteen years ago. It had been a cruel, ruthless whore, and I'd walked away from it in the same way I would have walked away from a pile of maggots. It had taken my wife and my daughter and my best friends, and I'd vowed to never put my hands on a guitar again. And I'd kept that vow. It had been fourteen years since I so much as strummed a chord. I still had my instruments in storage, but that's where they were going to stay. Forever.

I'd thought about music a lot of times, about the camaraderie of being in a band and the magic of being on stage when everything goes just right. When it's good, it's great. There's nothing like it. I missed it, longed for it, but I refused to give in to its seductive temptations. Music had betrayed me in the worst possible way. It had killed my family, and then it had made a cocaine addict out of me. I'd dealt with that for a couple of years after the crash, and had ended up losing all my worldly possessions. But music had taken more from me than just things. It had taken a piece of me that I would never be able to get back.

The guitar and I had gotten a divorce. I was done with it. For me, music just wasn't the driving force it had once been. It was difficult for me to even imagine that lifestyle anymore. We practically lived on the road back then. Sometimes we traveled on a bus, other times on a plane, and we always ended up in a hotel room that could have been anywhere. I was on stage six or seven nights a week, singing backup and shredding licks through a fifty thousand watt sound system, sweating and shouting and playing my heart out for thousands of screaming fans.

But that was yesterday. Today, I was Nicholas Colt, PI.

I'd been a private investigator for ten of the past fourteen years, and I was good at it. I'd been to conferences, and I'd gotten awards. I planned to write a book someday about all of my experiences as a detective. Maybe more than one. I was good at what I did. One of the best.

At least that's what I'd thought before Everett Harbaugh walked into my life. Now I wasn't so sure anymore. Was this really what I was cut out to do? Would someone better than me have been able to figure this out by now?

I didn't feel like a private investigator at the top of his game anymore. I felt like a bumbling idiot.

Those were my thoughts as I closed my eyes and drifted off into blackness. It was the kind of sleep where your mind just completely shuts down. You don't dream, and you don't turn. You just lie there in one spot, oblivious to anything and everything. With every beat of

your heart, another hour flies by. It's like falling into an abyss. It's the sleep of the dead.

When I finally regained consciousness, the clock on the bedside table said 2:03. I'd slept for almost four hours. I took a deep breath and tried to get up, but my arms and legs felt as though lead weights had been tied to them. Just ten more minutes, I told myself.

I closed my eyes again, and a million thoughts went swirling through my head.

Like a tornado.

A million thoughts, but only one that kept whizzing by repeatedly.

Shelby Spelling.

There was something very dark about her. She had totally trashed my Airstream camper, and she had popped the tires on my car. All because I'd smeared a bun full of hamburger sauce and a couple of packets of ketchup on her windshield.

I wondered what else she had planned for me.

Getting someone back for a harmless prank is one thing, but Shelby seemed intent on taking it to an unreasonable extreme. And if she had gone batshit ballistic on me for such a small thing, I wondered how far she might go for something bigger.

Something much bigger.

Something hurtful to her self-esteem.

Something emotionally devastating.

Something that drilled into the core of her being, speared her heart, plucked it out and discarded it like yesterday's news.

Shelby had been jilted by a man. A man she was obsessed with. A man who consumed her thoughts every minute of every day.

A man named Everett Harbaugh.

Shelby had acted genuinely surprised when I told her that Everett was missing, but I was beginning to think it was just that. An act. I knew all along that what she felt for Everett wasn't love, but I'd believed her when she said she would never do anything to hurt him. Now I wasn't so sure.

I opened my eyes. I was fully awake now. Four hours of sleep had somewhat rejuvenated my capacity to think, and I started putting some things together quickly.

Whoever was trying to frame Trent Appleton must have had access to Everett's information on the Sibling Boards, and I had a strong feeling now that it was Shelby. She could have gotten his user name and password from the receipt in his wallet, the same receipt I had gotten them from. And with a little research, she could have found out that Philip Davenport had been stabbed to death outside a convenience store on the night of his twentieth birthday. Philip's death had been a random occurrence, a coincidence, and Shelby used

it to her advantage. She drove down to Cocoa Beach and killed Stephanie Vowels on *her* twentieth birthday, knowing that someday, when the police finally put two and two together, it would appear as though a pattern had been established. Knowing it would appear as though the donor father was targeting all of the siblings created from his cryogenically preserved sperm.

There would have been no way for Shelby to know Trent Appleton's identity at the time, but it didn't matter. She didn't need to know who he was. His identity was not important, and neither was his motive. All Shelby needed to know was that *someone* would eventually be blamed for murdering Philip Davenport, Stephanie Vowels, and Everett Harbaugh, and that it wouldn't be her.

It was all very clear to me now. I couldn't believe that I hadn't seen it before. The perfect murder. It was genius, in a way, and Shelby Spelling certainly had the talent to pull it off. She had the talent, and the motivation, and the cunning devious mind. She had everything it took to make it all come together like clockwork.

I knew better than to be certain about anything. The Trent Appleton debacle had taught me that. I knew better than to be certain, but I definitely needed to take a second look at Shelby Spelling, and I needed to do it as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I climbed out of bed and took a quick shower. It was 2:38 by the time I was ready to leave Laurie's apartment. Edgar stood on the back of the couch meowing, begging me not to go. He'd really gotten attached to me. He loved me. That's what I thought until I looked in the kitchen and saw that his food dish was empty. I dumped some dry cat food into his bowl, raked my fingers through his fur a couple of times, and hurried on out the door.

I shook my head as I walked past my vandalized Jimmy in the parking lot. The two flat tires made it look old and junky. Shelby had gotten me back, all right. Now she was going to get hers.

The Woof-A-Burger in Gainesville was a little over an hour away. It was Friday, and Shelby's day off was Tuesday, so I figured she would be there. Rush hour hadn't kicked in yet, so I didn't think traffic would be an issue.

About halfway there, my cell phone vibrated. The caller ID said Bradley Harbaugh.

"This is Colt," I said.

"I wanted to let you know that we got a phone call from the kidnapper a couple of hours ago. He's demanding a ransom in the amount of twenty million dollars."

"Are you sure it's a he?"

"I'm just assuming it is," Bradley said. "But maybe not. The voice was altered electronically, so I don't know for sure. Why do you ask?"

"I was positive that his donor father kidnapped him," I said. "Now I'm positive that he didn't. Long story. Anyway, now I'm thinking that his ex-girlfriend is involved. I'm almost sure of it."

"Shelby?"

"Yeah. She might be acting alone, or maybe she has an accomplice. With everything that has happened over the past couple of days, it would make more sense if there were at least two of them working this thing. So you know Shelby?"

"Everett mentioned her a few times when they were going out, but I've never met her."

"She's obsessed with him," I said. "She was stalking him. I guess she figures if she can't have Everett, then at least she can tap his family for some money. Have you notified the police yet?"

"Yes. And I'm expecting to hear from the FBI any minute."

I was glad to hear that the feds were going to be involved now. This was working out better than I'd expected. Of course we still needed to find Everett, and nobody had a clue where he was, but he had a better

chance of surviving now that the cavalry was on the way.

“Do you know where the ransom call came from?” I said. “Did it show up on your caller ID?”

“It was a local number. The police said it came from a pay phone outside a convenience store. They’re checking it out. They’re hoping to get some pictures of the caller from a surveillance camera.”

“Okay. And was there a time limit on the ransom?”

“Midnight tonight,” he said. “The money is to be transferred to an offshore bank account. The kidnapper said that once the transfer is confirmed, he’ll give us Everett’s location.”

“And you’re sure Everett’s still alive?”

“Yes. The kidnapper let me talk to him. We only exchanged a few words, but I know it was Everett that I spoke to. I’m one hundred percent certain of that. Supposedly, he’s tied up in the backseat of his own car, and there’s an explosive device planted in the trunk. If the money’s not transferred by midnight, the bomb will be detonated remotely with a cell phone.”

It made sense that Shelby had stolen Everett’s BMW from my lot at Lake Barkley. She’d probably had a key made on the sly back when they were dating. It just seemed like the kind of thing she would have done. Or Everett might have even given her a key. That was another possibility.

I looked at my watch. Midnight was the deadline for sure now, and it was only a little over eight hours away. Thinking about it put a knot in my stomach.

“We don’t have much time,” I said.

“Of course I’m going to pay the ransom. No matter what the FBI suggests, I’m going to pay it.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell Bradley Harbaugh that his son was probably going to die whether he paid the ransom or not. That it was crucial we find him before midnight, regardless of what happened with the money. If Shelby was part of the team that had kidnapped Everett, he would be able to point the authorities in her direction immediately. Even if she planned to leave the country—which she almost certainly did—she wouldn’t want her identity known right away. She would need at least a day to move from one place to the other, a day without the hindrance of being watched for at all the airports.

That’s why Shelby had carefully planned for Everett’s donor father to be the primary suspect. While the police were chasing their tails with that false conclusion, as I had, she would have plenty of time to escape unnoticed. Of course Shelby didn’t know what I knew, that Trent Appleton was the donor and that he’d already been ruled out. As far as she knew, the police and the FBI would just now be starting to

examine her bogus little trail of bread crumbs.

"I'm on my way to Gainesville right now," I said. "When the FBI calls, tell them that Everett's donor father had nothing to do with anything. It was Shelby all along."

"Pardon me?"

"Just tell them that. I'll explain it all later."

"Okay."

"Tell them Shelby works at the Woof-A-Burger on College Avenue. She's the manager there. I'm guessing she'll finish her shift today. That way, everything will appear to be normal. Plus, it will give her an alibi if she's ever questioned. She couldn't have called from a Jacksonville pay phone if she was working in Gainesville at the time the call was made, right?"

"Right. So if she didn't make the call, it means there's definitely more than one kidnapper."

"Yeah. Nothing's for sure yet, but that's the way it looks right now. To tell you the truth, I'm figuring some of this out as we speak. Tell the FBI what I told you, that she was stalking Everett. I'll try to make sure she sticks around until they can get there to question her. She and I have some unfinished business anyway, so it'll seem natural that I paid her a visit."

"I'll tell them," he said. "But I'm still going to transfer the funds. It'll take a few hours to get that much together, but I should be able to make the midnight deadline with no problem. I don't care about the money. I just want my son back."

"You're a good dad, Bradley Harbaugh."

"Thanks."

I told him to call me with any new developments. Otherwise, I would be with Shelby Spelling until the FBI came to Woof-A-Burger to talk to her and possibly take her into custody.

A few minutes after I hung up with Bradley Harbaugh, my phone vibrated again. It was Laurie this time.

"Hi, sweetheart," I said.

"Where did you go?"

I gave her the condensed version of everything that was happening.

"It'll be out of my hands soon," I said. "Now that it's been established that an abduction has taken place, the FBI will head the investigation. Which is a good thing. They have the resources to do it right."

"And I'm sure they'll be interested in everything you've learned so far."

"I guess that's true. You know, I feel like calling Detective Barry Fleming and rubbing his nose in it. If the police had gotten involved sooner, Everett might be home by now."

"It's a shame he wouldn't listen to you," Laurie said. "But all's well that ends well, I suppose."

"That's another thing. I'm having serious doubts that this is going to end well, even with the feds on top of it. Once the money is transferred to an offshore account, Shelby and her accomplice won't have any reason to keep Everett alive. Maybe they'll play fair, but it isn't likely. Especially if Everett knows that Shelby is involved."

"I hope they find him in time."

"Me too," I said. "Anyway, I'm almost there. So I'll talk to you later. Okay?"

"Okay. I have to work at six, but call me on my cell no matter what."

I promised I would call her, and then we disconnected.

I steered into Woof-A-Burger's parking lot at 3:52. I whipped the Caprice into an open slot, killed the engine and climbed out and trotted inside. It was after lunch and before dinner, so it wasn't very busy. Ashley was at the register again.

"I need to speak with the manager," I said.

"She left early for the day. Is there something I can help you with?"

"You wouldn't happen to know where she went, would you?"

"No. I'm sorry. Hey, I remember you from the other day. Aren't you the one who smeared her windshield with—"

"Of course not," I said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I gave her a wink and then turned around and walked back out to the parking lot. I started the car and sat there and stared at the playground, which was vacant at the moment.

I hadn't planned on Shelby not being at work. This was not good. Maybe she'd already headed for the airport, but I didn't think so. She and her accomplice would need to make sure that the funds got transferred before they went anywhere, and they would need strong alibis at least up to the time the bomb exploded.

Shelby could have gone anywhere, but I figured that her residence would be as good a place as any to start looking. I needed her home address. I could have walked back inside and tried to get it from Ashley or another employee, but I doubted they would be able to help me. Managers and regular workers don't usually hang out. It's frowned upon. And managers like Shelby *certainly* wouldn't want the people working under her to know where she sleeps at night. They all hated her. By allowing any of them to know where she lived, she would risk waking up with eggs splattered on the front of her house every morning. Or worse. And even if one of the employees inside did know Shelby's address, most businesses have strict rules about the confidentiality of their employees' personal information. So I didn't bother pursuing it from that route.

I needed a computer. I sat there and tried to think where I might be able to find one in Gainesville on Friday at four o'clock in the afternoon. I supposed the public library would still be open, but I didn't have any idea where the closest branch was located. I was about to walk back inside and ask when I remembered something.

The first time I walked into Shelby's office, she pointed to a no smoking sign with a bunch of other stuff tacked to the wall around it. Receipts and schedules and whatnot, and a postcard from a dentist's office reminding her about an appointment.

Would Shelby bother to keep a dentist's appointment with everything else going on? Maybe she would. It would add to her alibi, for one thing.

The appointment was for Friday afternoon at four o'clock, but I couldn't recall the dentist's name. I closed my eyes and tried to visualize the postcard. There were two stamps on it. I remembered that. On one of the stamps, there was a picture of a Hawaiian shirt with the word *ALOHA!* written under it. Was the dentist from Hawaii? In my mind, I went through a list of surnames from the islands, ones that I knew from my travels as a musician, but nothing rang a bell. The card's sender had probably just gone there for vacation or something. Or perhaps the stamp had been sold randomly from the post office or from a machine.

I did seem to recall that the dentist had a foreign name. Hispanic, maybe.

I shut the car off, walked inside and asked Ashley if she had a phone book.

"I think there's one in the office," she said. "But I'm pretty sure it's locked."

"Would you mind checking for me? Better yet, there's a postcard from a dentist's office tacked to the wall in there. If you could just look at it and then tell me the dentist's name, I won't even need the phone book."

She hesitated. "I'm really not supposed to go in there."

"It's an emergency," I said. "I'm sure Shelby wouldn't mind just this once. Anyway, she'll never know."

I winked at her again.

"I could lose my job," she said.

"Please?"

She pulled her key out of the register and sauntered to the back of the store, her ponytail swaying behind her. She returned a few seconds later with a copy of the Gainesville Yellow Pages.

"I didn't see any postcard," she said. "Hurry up with the phone book. I need to put it back."

I flipped to the Ds. It didn't take me long to find the name of the

business I'd seen on the postcard. Once I saw it, I recognized it right away. It wasn't just one dentist. It was several working together. A group practice. I pointed to the address and asked Ashley if she knew how to get there, and she kindly gave me directions. I thanked her and slapped the book shut and hurried out of the restaurant.

The dentists' office was only a few miles away. I got there at 4:27. I steered into the last available parking place, which just happened to be right next to Shelby Spelling's Ford Fiesta.

I called Bradley Harbaugh and told him what was going on.

"I pretty much have her cornered," I said. "Give the FBI this address when they call, and give them my cell phone number. I won't let her out of my sight until I hear from them."

"Okay," he said. "I sure wish they would hurry up and call."

"Me too."

I hung up and walked inside and took a seat in the waiting area, which was empty except for a young man pressing a handful of cotton gauze against the front part of his mouth. A receptionist sat behind an open sliding glass window, talking to someone on the phone. I figured Shelby would have to walk past me as she left the office.

I sat there and pretended to look at a *Home and Garden* magazine from May of last year. The wall dividing the clinical work space from the waiting area wasn't very well insulated. I could hear the high-pitched squeal of an electric tool of some sort, a drill or an ultrasonic scaling device or something, along with an occasional yawp of pain. It made me feel fortunate that I wasn't in line for the same treatment. Not today, anyway.

The lady behind the sliding glass window told the guy with the gauze that his ride was on the way. He pulled the blood-soaked wad from his toothless front gums long enough to thank her, and then he put it back. He didn't seem to be in a very good mood, which was understandable.

The receptionist looked at me and gestured toward the clipboard on the counter in front of her.

"Did you sign in, sir?" she said.

"I'm just waiting for someone."

After a brief pause, she said, "May I ask the patient's name?"

There was a time when you could wander into a clinician's waiting room and sit there for hours without being noticed, but those days are gone. Everyone's paranoid now, and with good reason. A guy who walks into a professional practitioner's place of business without an appointment might really be waiting for a friend to come out, or he might be waiting for the right moment to randomly and senselessly kill everyone in the building. You just never know.

So I didn't give the receptionist any grief. The reason she asked was

understood. She didn't know that I had a good excuse for hanging around, and her lack of trust was fully warranted.

"The patient's name is Shelby Spelling," I said. "She's back there, right?"

The receptionist reached over and closed the window, neither confirming nor denying Shelby's presence. A couple of minutes later, a man in blue scrubs opened the door from the exam area and walked into the waiting room. I figured he was one of the dentists. He had a paper apron draped over his chest and a procedure mask over his mouth and nose.

He pulled down the mask.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave, sir," he said.

"I need to speak with Shelby," I said. "Is there a problem with that?"

"Actually, there is. She says she's not expecting anyone, and that your presence here makes her nervous. Perhaps you could contact her at another time."

I thought about going outside and waiting in my car, but I figured they might not approve of that either.

I rose from the uncomfortable plastic seat.

"My name's Nicholas Colt," I said. "I'm a private investigator, and I'm working in conjunction with the police and the FBI on a kidnapping case. We have reason to believe that Ms. Spelling might be involved. I just need to talk with her for a few minutes. It's very important."

"May I see your credentials?"

I showed him my PI license. While he was looking at it, Shelby peeked into the waiting room. There was an echoing *boom* as the door slammed shut, followed by the sound of sneakers galloping across a tile floor.

"Is there another way out of here?" I said.

"Yes. There's an emergency exit at the end of the hall, but—"

"Thanks."

I made a move toward the door to the back office, but the dentist grabbed my arm before I could get a hand on the knob.

"You can't go back there," he said.

"You don't understand, doctor. She's getting away."

I tried to pry his hand off my arm, but his fingers were clamped down like a steel vice.

"Jennifer, call the police!" he shouted.

I looked over at the receptionist's window, saw the woman I presumed to be Jennifer standing there on the other side of the frosted glass. She picked up the phone and started punching in numbers.

I thought about clocking the dentist in the jaw, and I would have—

and probably would have been arrested for assault and battery—if the young man with the gauze hadn't spoken up when he did.

"I'll get her," he said.

He bolted past us, opened the door to the back office and took off running.

Jennifer screamed as he trotted by, and then she looked through the window and told the dentist that the police were on the way.

The next thing I heard was a series of gunshots.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I reached down and pulled my .38 out of its holster and pointed it at the dentist's face. It was something I'd always wanted to do, although I wasn't thinking in those terms at the time.

"Let me go," I said.

He did. Immediately.

I darted into the hallway and ran to the back of the building, through the emergency exit and into the alley. Shelby was lying on the pavement in a puddle of blood, and the guy who'd chased her was standing there with a gun in his hand.

"Got her," he said.

"Have you lost your mind?" I said. "Why did you shoot this woman?"

"You said you were with the FBI. You said she was a kidnapper."

"No I didn't."

"You sure did. I was sitting there. I heard you."

All I could do was shake my head. There was no time to explain everything.

I knelt down beside Shelby.

"Where does it hurt?" I said.

"My ass. He shot me in the ass."

I turned her onto her side, took my shirt off and pressed it against the wound. She'd lost some blood, but I was relieved to know that her injury probably wasn't life-threatening.

"Where's Everett?" I said.

"You're kidding, right? We've been through all that. How many days has it been since he disappeared? Three? Four? I hate to say it, but he's probably dead. If he hasn't shown up by now—"

"His dad talked to him earlier. He's still alive, and you know where he is. Tell me, or I'm going to give you a matching hole on the other side of your butt."

"I don't know anything, Colt. All I know is that you and the guy who shot me are going to jail."

She seemed determined to play this thing out to the end. She was a liar and a manipulator and a cunning sociopath, and I should have kept my eyes on her from the beginning. She needed psychiatric help. I knew that, but it was still hard for me to feel sorry for her. Regardless of the reasons, Shelby Spelling was a very dangerous person. She needed to be behind bars.

She was breathing hard and cringing from the pain, but as far as I could tell she hadn't shed a single tear. She was mentally insane and

physically tough, and through the years I'd learned that those were an especially lethal combination of attributes.

"You're not fooling anyone," I said. "If you don't know anything, then why did you run away when you saw me?"

"I thought you were after me about the stuff I did to your camper. And your car. I'm not sorry about any of that, by the way. You never should have messed with me."

"You're going to pay me for the cleanup," I said. "And my tires. And my laptop."

"Sue me," she said.

An ambulance followed three police cruisers into the alley. A state trooper and two deputies from the county sheriff's office climbed out of the cars and pointed guns at us. Using their vehicles for shields, they shouted freeze and all that, and once the shooter and I were facedown on the asphalt and handcuffed, the EMS guys rushed over and tended to Shelby. They patched up the hole in her ass, stuck an IV in her arm, and loaded her into the meat wagon. All in about ten minutes. They blasted the siren and headed for the hospital.

The guys from the sheriff's department put me in one car and the shooter in the other. The state trooper gave the other officers a half salute, climbed into his cruiser and left the scene.

It took a little over an hour to get everything sorted out. When all was said and done, the shooter got arrested and I was set free. Amazingly, I had Detective Barry Fleming to thank for it. He'd been in contact with Bradley Harbaugh, and he knew that the feds were on the case now. As it turned out, I'd been spot-on about Everett being kidnapped, and Fleming had pretty much ignored me since day one. If I'd gone to jail, it would have only added to his embarrassment. So he went to bat for me, and the deputies let me go.

I apologized to the dentist for pulling a gun on him, and for all the trouble I'd inadvertently brought to his office. He didn't seem real happy, but he wished me luck in finding the kidnapper.

After everyone else had left the parking lot, I gave Bradley a call. It was a bad connection, lots of static, but I got the gist of what he was saying.

"I guess this is it for me," I said. "I've done all I can do. The FBI can interview Shelby at the hospital. I know she was involved, so I'm hoping they can get something out of her."

"I talked to an agent named Chet Overton a few minutes ago," Bradley said. "They have a team on the way to the hospital there in Gainesville, and there's one coming to my house to set up telephone surveillance in case the kidnapper calls back. Plus, they're trying to trace the offshore bank account where I'm supposed to deposit the twenty million dollars. So everyone's working on it, but there's not a

lot of time left. I'm just praying that the kidnappers will keep their word and give us Everett's location once the money is transferred."

"I hope so," I said. "I wish there was something more I could do."

"You've been a huge help to us, Nicholas, and I appreciate everything you've done. Just send me a bill for the time you've spent on this. Hopefully, Everett will be sitting here at the table later tonight drinking a can of root beer and eating a bag of corn chips, and he can call you and thank you himself."

"What was that?"

"I said hopefully Everett can call you and thank you himself."

"Not that. Something about what he's going to be eating and drinking."

"Oh, that. It's kind of a joke in our family. Since Everett was about three years old, his favorite food combination has been corn chips and root beer. It's like he craves it or something. Can't get enough of it. That's how I knew it was Everett when I talked to him earlier. I asked him his favorite snack. It was a question that only he would know. Kind of like a secret code."

"I can barely hear you," I said. "You're breaking up really bad. I'll call you back in a little while and see how everything's going."

"Okay. Thanks again, Nicholas."

I hung up, wondering if I was the smartest detective in the world or the dumbest.

I left a little rubber on the pavement as I took a right out of the parking lot and headed for the PEAK house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I was low on gas, so I stopped at a service station with a convenience store attached to it and pumped out twenty dollars' worth of regular unleaded. When I walked inside to pay, I glanced down the potato chip aisle and noticed some shirts for sale on a rack. I needed one. I'd used mine to apply pressure to Shelby's bleeding buttocks, and all I had on now was the tank top I'd been wearing underneath it.

The gas station T-shirts were \$3.99 each. Some of them were knockoffs, unauthorized versions of shirts sold at concerts back in the seventies and eighties. There was one that said Colt .45 from a show we did in Baton Rouge in 1986, but the only size they had was small. I settled for a plain black one, extra-large. I took it to the register and paid for it and my gasoline and left the store. The shirt was too big for me, but I wanted something that would cover my revolver when I slid it back onto my belt. It would be perfect for that.

It was dark by the time I got to the fraternity house. The gravel lot behind the building was full, so I had to find a place on the street to park the Caprice. It took a while, and I ended up squeezing into a place three blocks away. I pulled out my cell, thinking I would give Laurie a call and let her know what was going on, but the battery was dead. I tossed the phone into the glove compartment, strapped on my .38, climbed out of the car and started walking. On my way, I passed a couple of guys going in the same direction. I figured they were students, Everett's age or maybe a little younger. One of them wore a University of Florida football jersey, the other a blue polo.

"Kind of hard to find a parking place around here," I said.

"There's a party at the PEAK house," Blue Polo said. "Nine kegs and a live band."

Football Jersey chimed in with a vulgar, demeaning, misogynistic reference to the young women they were expecting to be at the party. I didn't know how accurate their assessment was, but they made it sound as though the night would undoubtedly evolve into a wild, drunken orgy. It reminded me of what Laurie had said about the Phi Epsilon Alpha Kappa fraternity. In my book, these guys were rejects for sure. Not only from every other fraternity on campus, but from the human race.

They got me thinking.

If my little girl hadn't died in the plane crash, she would have turned fifteen this year, just a couple of years away from starting college herself. She was my baby, and every young woman going to the party at the PEAK house was somebody's baby too. Every one of

them had someone who cared about them, someone who would be horrified by what Blue Polo and Football Jersey were talking about. Someone who would happily wring their necks for saying such things.

Kids grow up and they develop an interest in sex, and that's the way it should be. It's natural. It's why we've survived as a species. But to me, at that moment, Football Jersey and Blue Polo seemed like some sort of predators. They were out for one thing, and one thing only, and I couldn't just walk on by without giving them an earful from the daddy inside me.

"You guys need to remember that your mothers were young women at one time too," I said. "And maybe you have sisters, female cousins, whatever. Think about them, and then think about a couple of mouth-breathing, tongue-lolling, slimeball losers following them around as if they were dogs in heat."

The insults I'd hurled at them didn't seem to register. That's how stupid these guys were.

"Anybody touches my sister, I'll kill them," Blue Polo said.

I stopped in front of him and faced him down. "Just remember," I said. "Someone feels the exact same way about every girl you're going to talk to tonight. Think about that and try to show a little respect."

I turned and walked on ahead, hoping I'd planted at least a tiny seed of conscience into their pea brains.

When I got a little closer to the fraternity house, I could hear that the band had already started playing. I walked around to the front of the building and mounted the porch, wondering if I was doing the right thing. Technically, I'd signed off on the job of finding Everett Harbaugh. His parents weren't paying me anymore. I was running on my own dime now.

Not that the money was ever the most important thing. Everett had seemed like a fine young man during our brief encounter, and I'd found myself genuinely caring about what happened to him. Still, some people might have said that I didn't have a horse in the race anymore. That the police and the FBI were more than capable of bringing this to a conclusion—satisfying or otherwise—without my help.

But Bradley Harbaugh had mentioned something over the phone, something that had sent a chill up my spine. That bit about Everett's favorite food combination. It was probably nothing, but I had to check it out.

There was a cluster of young men standing out on the porch, mingling and talking and trying to look thoughtful and sophisticated. They wore khaki pants and expensive designer polo shirts and topsiders, almost as though it was some kind of uniform. They all had disposable red plastic cups in their hands, and some of them were

smoking cigarettes. As I approached, they looked at me as if I'd just climbed out of an alien spaceship.

I didn't belong there. I was about two decades too old.

"I'm looking for John Patterson," I said.

"He's up in his room," one of the guys said. "Studying. On a Friday. What a geek."

The others laughed.

"Thanks," I said.

I opened the door and walked inside. A bunch of people were milling around in the front room. Again, everyone was carrying a drink. It was mostly guys talking to guys and girls talking to girls, but I figured that would change once the alcohol kicked in.

I climbed the stairs and navigated the hallway to room 212. I knocked. Waited. Knocked again. The peephole darkened. I stood there for a few seconds staring at the knob, expecting it to turn. Nothing happened. I cupped my hand around my ear and pressed it against the door, but the band was still playing and I couldn't hear anything.

I waited until the song ended, and then I listened again. I heard voices. Male. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but I could tell that there were two of them, that it wasn't just John Patterson talking to someone on the phone.

The band started playing again. They'd cranked the volume up a notch. They were even louder than before. I knocked a third time, and when it became obvious that nobody was going to answer, I pulled my revolver from its holster and used my shoulder as a battering ram. Like a detective in an old black-and-white movie might have done, back in the day when men were men and doors were props.

It was an overly aggressive move, but I'd been through a lot in the past couple of days and I didn't feel like pussyfooting around. I knew that Patterson was in there, and I knew he was trying to hide something from me. Otherwise, he would have answered the door—which, in this case, was definitely *not* part of a movie set. It was solid and heavy and built to keep fire and Nicholas Colt on the other side of it. After the painful first impact with my shoulder, I decided to give my foot a try.

The lock popped and the door swung inward.

John Patterson was sitting on one of the beds. He was holding a shotgun, aiming it at my chest. It was an antique single-barrel, probably another family heirloom that had been passed down for generations. Personally, I would have been afraid to shoot the thing. I would have been afraid that it might blow up in my face.

"Drop your gun and close the door," Patterson said.

I dropped my gun and closed the door. I didn't have much of a

choice. The shotgun might have been old, but the barrel was long and fat and menacing and pointed right at me. If Patterson decided to squeeze the trigger, that would be all she wrote. *BLAMMO!* I would be cut in half.

“Where’s Everett?” I said.

“Where do you think he is?”

“I think he’s hiding inside one of those armoires. The same place he was the first time I came into this room.”

“I guess you think you’re pretty clever, don’t you?” Patterson said.

“What can I say? I get lucky sometimes.”

“How did you know?” he said. “How could you possibly have known?”

“I didn’t until just a little while ago, when Bradley Harbaugh mentioned the significance of Everett’s favorite food combination. There was a bag of corn chips and a can of root beer on the desk when I talked to you Wednesday, as if someone had been sitting there snacking. At the time, I assumed it was you. But it wasn’t. It was Everett. He’s been here all along, hasn’t he? He was devastated when he heard the news about his mother using a sperm bank to get pregnant, and he was furious with her for not telling him sooner. And when you think about it, who wouldn’t be angry about something like that? Everett’s whole life had been a lie, in a way. He was pissed, and all that rage kept simmering inside him until it reached a boiling point. He wanted to get his mother back, somehow, to get revenge on her for keeping the big secret for so long, so the two of you tossed some ideas around, and you cooked up this little kidnapping scheme with a twenty million dollar ransom. Everett knew his mother was good for the money, and he knew she would pay it to get him back safely. How am I doing so far?”

“Pretty good,” Patterson said. “Please continue.”

“So you came up with the kidnapping bit, but that wasn’t enough. Everett wanted the sperm donor to suffer too. You guys didn’t know his identity, but you knew the names of the other children he produced. You got all that from the Siblings Board website. When you saw that Philip Davenport had been murdered on the day he turned twenty, and that Stephanie Vowels’ twentieth birthday was coming up soon, the plan really started coming together. You guys decided to frame the sperm donor for the abduction, and the only way to do that was to frame him for murdering a couple of his other offspring. You wanted to make him look like a serial killer, methodically working his way down the list as each of them turned twenty. It didn’t matter that he would eventually be exonerated. It would disrupt his life in a major way for a while, and it would be the perfect diversion for the police, aimed at giving you and Everett plenty of time to take the money and

run. And by golly, you almost got away with it. You would have, if Bradley Harbaugh hadn't told me about Everett's mad cravings for corn chips and root beer on the phone earlier."

"We're still going to get away with it," Patterson said. "You can't stop us now."

One of the doors on the armoire to the left of me swung open, and Everett Harbaugh stepped out into the room.

"Sorry it had to go down like this, Mr. Colt," he said. "I really didn't intend for anyone to get hurt."

"What about Stephanie Vowels?" I said. "Seems like she was the big loser in this whole deal. You drove down to Cocoa Beach, tied a rope around her neck, and dropped her off a bridge. You killed her to throw me and everyone else who might be looking for you off the trail."

Everett stared at the floor. He seemed to be ashamed of that one little detail.

"You have to admit, it was a pretty cool plan," Patterson said.

"There's nothing cool about murder," I said.

Everett looked up. "Anyway, what's done is done. And John's right. There's no stopping us now. The money will be transferred soon, and we have a private plane waiting for us at a private airstrip. Next stop, Mexico."

"They'll find you and extradite you," I said. "You might be able to bribe your way through for a few years, but they'll catch up with you eventually."

"Oh, we're not going to stay in Mexico," Patterson said. "That's just the first leg of our trip. We have everything lined up to be in the Philippines by day after tomorrow. No extradition from there. With twenty million dollars at our disposal, we're going to live like kings. We can buy our own island if we want to."

"So what are you going to do now?" I said. "Shoot me? The band downstairs is loud, but it's not loud enough to mask a shotgun blast. And it's going to be kind of hard to explain all the blood splatters on the wall."

Everett turned to Patterson. "That's a good question," he said. "What are we going to do with him?"

Patterson set the shotgun down and grabbed one of the pillows from the bed. He stood and walked over and picked my revolver up off the floor.

"Simple," he said. "We'll just shoot him with his own gun and leave him here. We'll use the pillow for a silencer. I saw it on TV. Works like a charm. By the time someone comes in to check on the room, we'll be long gone."

Beads of sweat dotted Everett's forehead. He looked at his watch.

"All right," he said. "Go ahead and get it over with. We need to get out of here."

Patterson handed him the gun and the pillow.

"I did the girl," Patterson said. "It's your turn."

Everett looked at the revolver, and then he looked at me. He swallowed hard. His hands were trembling, as was his upper lip. He wasn't a killer. He was in this thing deep, but he hadn't murdered anyone yet. Maybe he thought there was still hope for him to salvage some kind of life, even if he and Patterson ended up getting caught.

"I can't do this," he said. "I have a better idea. Instead of killing him, we can just tie him up and gag him and leave him here. It'll serve the same purpose. Nobody will find him until we're long gone."

"We can't take that chance," Patterson said. "If someone does come in here before we're off the continent, we need them to find a corpse. Not a private investigator who can tell them every detail about what we've done. Just aim and pull the trigger. It's really easy. Then we can be on our way."

"If it's so easy, then you do it."

"No. You said we were going to be equal partners in this thing. The only fair way is to split the risks along with the rewards. If we get caught, I'm not going to be the only one facing a murder charge."

Everett stared at the gun. He was still shaking, still thinking it over. He didn't want to kill me, but he knew now that he had to. There was no other way. Either I died and the two of them made a clean getaway with twenty million dollars, or I lived and they risked serious prison time. Maybe even the death penalty. It wasn't much of a dilemma, when you got down to it. He knew I had to die, and he knew Patterson wasn't going to do the dirty work this time.

Everett chewed on his bottom lip. He was breathing hard, practically panting. He wrapped the pillow around the .38 and aimed it at my face. I heard the bullet whistle past my left ear as I ducked and rammed him in the gut with my head. As all the air left his lungs and he doubled over in excruciating pain, I grabbed the gun and twisted it out of his hand, nearly taking his trigger finger along with it. I kned him in the groin and then hammered his forehead with the butt of the revolver, opening a cut over his left eye. Bright red blood gushed from the wound, and he fell to the floor moaning and writhing. His eyes rolled back in his head as his body convulsed and then went limp. He was out cold. Or dead, maybe. I couldn't tell for sure.

While all that was happening, John Patterson should have gone for the shotgun. But he didn't. He came after me instead, which told me that the shotgun probably wasn't even loaded. I aimed my .38 downward at a forty-five degree angle, intending to shoot him in the

leg, but before I could get a round off he slammed into me and pinned me against the top of one of the desks. It was the one on the left, the one I'd sat at the first time I'd come to the room. The one with the nice leather blotter and the antique letter opener.

Patterson had a good grip on both of my wrists. He lifted my right arm and slammed it against the edge of the desk. A searing avalanche of white-hot agony coursed through me as my hand sprung open and the gun fell to the floor. If my arm wasn't broken, it might as well have been. I couldn't move my fingers, not even a little bit.

Everett still hadn't stirred. It was just the two of us, Patterson and me, engaged in hand-to-hand combat, and he was on top. He had the advantage, and he was physically stronger. And my right arm wasn't working anymore. The only thing I had going for me was experience, but that wasn't going to be enough. Not this time.

The only way for me to win was to fight dirty.

And that's exactly what I planned to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“How does it feel to know you’re going to die?” Patterson said.

I ignored the question.

“Everett needs a doctor,” I said. “He’s hurt bad.”

“Do I look concerned? Everett’s a wimp. I hope he’s dead. More money for me. I don’t need Everett anymore. Everything’s set. I’m going to be a millionaire, and there’s nothing you or anyone else can do to stop that from happening.”

“You’re insane,” I said. “You’re the one who’s going to die tonight.”

He leaned over to say something, but his face got a little too close to mine and I craned my neck forward and latched onto his nose with my teeth. His eyes bulged and he started grunting and screaming like a little kid. Instinctively, he let go of my wrists and tried to force my jaw open with his fingers. As he was doing that, I felt around on the desk with my left hand, the only one that was working at the time.

I was hoping to wrap my fingers around the handle of the letter opener. I visualized grabbing the tool and jamming it into the side of Patterson’s neck. In that scenario, a fountain of blood squirted from his carotid artery, pulsing out in arcs and showering the walls and the desk and the ceiling with dripping dots of liquid crimson. In my fantasy, Patterson backed away from me, gurgling and clutching his throat, the pressurized leak in his neck slowing to a trickle now, the color draining from his face. He staggered in a circle for a few seconds, and then collapsed to the floor beside his fallen comrade.

That was the climactic scene playing in my head as Patterson frantically tried to pry my teeth from the ripping, crunching clump of cartilage they were clamped down on. That was the action movie version, but that’s not what really happened.

I never got my hand on the letter opener. Instead, I found something cold and hard and heavy, something that almost seemed custom made to the contours of my hand. It wasn’t big, and it wasn’t small. You could have housed it in a peanut butter jar. I picked it up, saw its blurred shape with my peripheral vision. I’d noticed the piece before. It was a cast iron elephant with an antique copper finish, a coin bank being used for a paperweight. At least that’s what it was to most people. To me, at that moment, it was a first-rate skull buster.

I slammed the elephant’s rear legs into the back of Patterson’s head, just behind his right ear. I couldn’t really see his eyes or the expression on his face, but I felt his fingers go slack, followed by the rest of him. He went limp on top of me, dead weight, his traumatized brain no longer controlling his body movements or—based on the

warm wetness suddenly spreading over my right thigh—his bladder.

I unclenched my teeth, turned my head to the side and spat out a thick salty wad of blood and skin and snot. I retched and hiccupped and dry heaved a few times, and then I shifted my weight and rolled Patterson off of me. He tumbled to the floor in a heap.

My first thought was to call 911. All three of us needed medical attention. There wasn't a landline in the room, but I figured Patterson had a cell phone. Mine, unfortunately, was back in the car with a dead battery.

I slowly rose from my position on the desk, my lower spine wrenched from bending backwards and my right arm still practically useless from the pounding it had taken. I knelt on one knee, but before I could reach over and check Patterson's pockets for a phone, a voice from behind me said, "Don't move."

It was Everett. He had my gun.

"Be careful with that," I said. "It has a hair trigger."

"Don't tell me what to do, Colt. I'm calling the shots now."

We were both talking loudly, practically shouting in order to be heard over the band. Everett's face was covered with blood, as was the front of his shirt. He looked like something out of a horror movie.

But he had the gun, so he was indeed calling the shots.

"I have a question," I said. "The other day when you came to my place, how did you know—"

"That you were going to be drunk? That you would pass out on the table?"

"Yeah. How did you know that?"

"I didn't. My mother has a prescription for a tranquilizer. I dropped one in your drink while you weren't looking. It makes you really sleepy, especially when you mix it with alcohol."

"You poisoned me," I said. "You could have killed me."

"But I didn't."

I gestured toward the young man on the floor.

"Your friend needs an ambulance," I said.

John Patterson looked even worse than Everett Harbaugh. Way worse. His nose was dangling loosely to one side, and there was a dark red puddle under his head. He was pale, and I couldn't tell for sure if he was breathing or not.

If I had been forced to guess, I would have said that he wasn't.

"He's dead," Everett said. "Anyone can see that. You and I are going to walk out of here together. We're going to drive to the airstrip, and you're going to fly to Mexico with me. Then I'll let you go."

"You're taking me hostage?" I said. "That's not what you want to do at this point. Really, it's not. There's still a chance for you, Everett. You might have to spend a few years behind bars, but you're young

enough to rebound and make a life for yourself when you get out.”

“Shut up.”

“I heard what John Patterson said. He was the one who killed Stephanie Vowels. I’ll testify to that in court. You might even get off with probation. On the other hand, if you—”

“Just shut up, man. If it wasn’t for you, John and I would have been out of here by now. Just shut up and let me think for a minute.”

He scooted over to the armoire on the left, the one he’d been hiding in. He opened the door, pulled out a backpack, unzipped it and extracted a laptop computer. He plugged it in and turned it on and waited for it to boot up. Once it was ready, he typed something, waited, typed some more and waited some more. The revolver was on the floor beside him.

“Well?” I said.

“It’s there. The money’s there. Let’s go. We’re going to take John’s car. Reach into his right front pants pocket and get his keys.”

I reached into Patterson’s right front pants pocket and got his keys. I could feel the warmth of his flesh through the lining. He was still warm, but I couldn’t tell if he had a pulse or not. I couldn’t tell if he was breathing.

I was hoping to find his cell phone, although I’m not sure what I would have done with it if I had. Maybe I could have palmed it without Everett noticing. Then, at some point, I could have secretly called for help. Maybe. Anyway, it wasn’t there.

I turned back to Everett.

“Everyone knows you’ve been missing for a while,” I said. “How are you planning on getting out of this house without anyone seeing you? Have you thought about that?”

“Everyone’s in the party room. They’re all drunk.” He paused. “But you’re right. I shouldn’t take any chances.”

Everett stood. He was a little wobbly, and his eyes weren’t tracking properly. He seemed confused for a few seconds, but then he snapped out of it. He reached into the armoire on the right and pulled out a werewolf mask, the kind you can buy at any costume shop. It was a scary thing, a fierce snarling monster with coarse black hair and yellow eyes and fangs dripping with blood. I was pretty sure it had shown up in my nightmares a few times when I was a kid.

“Nobody’s going to notice *that*,” I said, sarcastically.

“It’s John’s mask, from last Halloween. Everyone knows it’s his. He puts it on at parties sometimes, just goofing around. He and I are about the same size, so if anyone sees me walking out, they’ll think it’s him.”

“Clever. But you’re still never going to get away with it. You should give yourself up now, before it’s too late.”

Once again ignoring my advice, Everett grabbed some things from the armoire. He tossed me a clean shirt and a clean towel and a bottle of antibacterial hand sanitizer.

“Wipe that shit off your face,” he said.

We both wiped ourselves off and put on fresh shirts. Everett put on a lightweight jacket as well, and then the werewolf mask. I pulled a blanket from the bed and draped it over Patterson’s arms and legs and chest. I could see now that he was breathing, but he didn’t look good. I figured he might be in shock, and that he would die soon if he didn’t get some medical attention.

Everett was leaning against the armoire, not looking very spry himself.

“Take a look at your future,” I said, nodding toward Patterson. “That’s going to be you if you don’t surrender to the police.”

Everett shook his head. “Let’s go.”

He was holding the revolver inside his jacket pocket. I opened the door and stepped into the hallway, and he followed. I glanced over my shoulder and saw that he was using the wall to steady himself.

Before we proceeded, he made it clear that he would shoot me in the back if I tried anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I had no intention of getting on an airplane and flying to Mexico with Everett Harbaugh. He'd said that he would let me go once we got down there, but I doubted it. I figured there were more accomplices in this scheme. The pilot, for one. Maybe he was a freelancer, just in it for a one-time payment. A hired hand. Maybe he didn't know anything about anything. But, whatever the case, he was doing something illegal, and he knew he was doing something illegal, and he wouldn't want me around to potentially identify him. So there was the pilot, for sure, and Everett probably had a helper—maybe more than one—on the ground in Mexico, a person or two to get him off the continent and on the way to the Philippines. People like that aren't keen on letting hostages just walk away. They might let me go—out in the middle of the desert, or five thousand feet over the gulf. No thanks.

I decided to make my move on the staircase. I thought it would be my best chance to make it out of this thing alive. There were a lot of young men and women in the house, and even though most of them were drinking and dancing and comfortably oblivious to everything but each other, I figured there was at least a chance that a few of them would come running if they heard a big boom. Especially one as big as my Smith and Wesson .38 caliber revolver would make for them now that we were closer to the party.

Surely the noise from a gunshot would attract some attention. Plus, Everett's balance wasn't a hundred percent. He probably had a concussion from when I clouted him in the forehead with the butt of the gun. So I figured the staircase was going to be my best bet, the best location to attempt an escape. The trick, of course, was to not get shot and killed in the process.

Everett and I made it to the landing. I gripped the banister with my left hand and started my descent, nice and slow. If Everett had been smart, he would have stayed a few steps behind me. But he wasn't smart. He was careless and inattentive at a time when he should have been on high alert. He knew I didn't have eyes in the back of my head, and he knew I couldn't hear anything because of the band. So he probably didn't think much about keeping a safe distance. But if he'd been paying better attention, he would have realized that I could see his distorted reflection in the blades of the stainless steel guillotine mobile dangling overhead. I could see that he was close behind me, well within reach.

When we got to the middle of the stairwell, I did a quick one-eighty

and grabbed his right wrist with my left hand. The gun discharged, blowing a fat hole through the pocket of his jacket and luckily not through me. He pulled the trigger again and again and again, but I had his hand pinned against the railing on that side and the bullets plowed through the sheetrock. I hoped they didn't hit anyone on the other side of the wall. But I didn't think they would. The angle was wrong. I figured they would bore through the front of the house and whiz on out to the yard at a harmlessly high trajectory.

Everett kept pulling the trigger until the bullets were gone, and then he tried to do to me what I had done to him. He tried to pistol whip me. He managed to wriggle out of my grip, and then he pulled the gun out of his pocket and raised it and came down hard, but I was able to duck to the left and avoid the full impact of the blow.

I avoided getting my skull bashed in, but the gun's hardwood handle nearly amputated my right ear. That's the way it felt at the time, anyway. Blood trickled down my neck, and a constant ringing filled my head. Like an alarm at a firehouse. I tried to shake it off, but the bell kept clanging. I figured another hit like that would put me down. I couldn't let that happen.

I was dazed, and it took me a few seconds to realize that the band had stopped playing. I grabbed Everett's wrist and slammed his hand against the wall, and the gun flew loose and wheeled end-over-end down the steps.

I glanced downward. A crowd had gathered at the bottom of the staircase.

Someone down there shouted, "Hey! That old guy's trying to kill John Patterson."

The old guy being me, of course, and John Patterson being Everett Harbaugh. Everett's trick with the mask was working.

I got Everett in a headlock. He, in turn, started punching at me wildly, trying to add a few broken ribs to my list of injuries. Neither of us was very steady, and I thought for sure we were going to tumble down the stairs together and break our necks.

But we didn't.

A stampede of footsteps galloped up the wooden risers, and I felt at least two sets of hands grab me and pull me away. They forced me back up to the landing and pinned me on the floor. A young man with a beard and a bunch of sharp things in his ears knelt down and got in my face.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Nicholas Colt. I'm a private investigator."

I heard a distant male voice say something about calling the cops, and then I must have passed out. I woke up two hours later, but I wasn't at the PEAK house anymore.

I was in the emergency room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

They didn't admit me to the hospital. They treated me and let me go. No broken bones, but my right arm was badly bruised and the doctor said there might be some nerve damage. She told me to keep it in a sling for a few days and to make an appointment with my primary care physician. Like any of that was going to happen. She obviously didn't know me very well.

A pair of FBI agents spoke to me at length while I was in the ER, and I told them everything I knew. I told them about following the wrong trail, about the Five Points Posse motorcycle gang and Shelby Spelling the ex-girlfriend. I told them about John Patterson the roommate murdering Stephanie Vowels the half-sibling in an effort to frame Trent Appleton the sperm donor. They took a lot of notes and told me they would be in touch if they needed any additional information. One of them gave me a business card with a cell phone number written on the back of it. Strictly confidential, he said, only to be used if I suddenly remembered something else pertinent to the investigation.

I didn't say anything about breaking into Klein Fertility. They didn't ask, and I didn't tell.

"I'm assuming Everett's in custody now," I said.

The one named Parker looked at the one named Sinclair. Sinclair shrugged.

"He got away," Parker said. "We're still looking for him."

"He was supposed to meet someone at an airstrip," I said. "From there, he was going to Mexico, and then to the Philippines."

"Do you know where the airstrip is?"

"No."

"Do you know where they were supposed to land in Mexico?"

"No."

Sinclair took a sip from the Styrofoam coffee cup he'd been carrying when he and Parker walked in. He made a sour face, as if he wanted to spit it out.

"Somehow, Everett left the fraternity house before the police arrived," he said. "We talked to some people who'd been at the party, but nobody seemed to know anything. Apparently he was wearing a mask that belonged to his roommate, and everyone thought—"

"That he was John Patterson," I said.

"Right. And it might be that some of his fraternity brothers are covering for him. If that's the case, there's not much we can do about it. And if he's already left the country, we'll probably never find him."

"What about Patterson?"

"He's in surgery," Parker said.

"He's alive?"

"He was hanging by a thread when EMS got there. They had to perform CPR in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. He's in critical condition, but right now it looks like he's going to pull through. We'll be watching him closely, and of course we'll have a slew of questions for him when he wakes up. If everything you're telling us is true, he's going to be facing quite a few charges. First degree murder being at the top of the list."

I nodded. I was happy that I hadn't killed Patterson. It would have been ruled self-defense, but it would have weighed on my mind for a long time. I was glad he was alive, and I was glad he would be facing charges for the murder of Stephanie Vowels. When you got down to it, she was the real victim in this whole ordeal. Everything else could be fixed, or at least patched up well enough to keep on moving down the highway.

But you can't fix dead. You just can't do it.

Apparently, Everett had gotten away with accessory to murder, and he'd gotten away with twenty million dollars. I wondered what life would be like for him now. Maybe he would live like a king in the Philippines, the way he and John Patterson had planned. Or maybe he would be a nervous wreck, constantly looking over his shoulder, wondering how much longer it would take for the authorities to catch up to him, wondering if today would be the day.

Everett was an international fugitive now, probably destined to be on the FBI's ten most wanted list. To me, that would be a miserable existence, worse than almost anything. I wouldn't have traded places with him, not for all the money in the world.

It was three o'clock in the morning by the time I left the hospital. I thought about calling Laurie, but I didn't want to wake her. She probably would have insisted on driving to Gainesville to pick me up, and it just wasn't necessary. I was fine except for my right arm. There was no reason I couldn't drive myself home.

I took a taxi to where I'd parked the Caprice. I climbed in and started it and drove up to the PEAK house and pulled into the gravel lot in back. Everything was dark and quiet now. No more loud music, no more drinking and laughing and mingling and flirting. No more fun of any kind. Police cars and ambulances tend to have that effect. They tend to be party poopers. I wondered about the two guys I'd lectured on the sidewalk earlier, wondered if anything I said had sunk in. Probably not. At any rate, I was happy their night had been ruined.

I sat there and stared at the back of the house for a while. Something was still bothering me, and it had to do with automobiles.

Everett's BMW had been stolen from my lot on Lake Barkley. Someone had managed to defeat the alarm and get it out of there without being noticed. I'd been thinking professional thief all along, but there was another possibility. Someone with a spare set of keys could have taken the car. Someone Everett trusted. A third accomplice.

Everett Harbaugh and John Patterson would have needed a fair amount of cash up front to arrange for an airplane to Mexico, and the BMW would have fetched around thirty grand on the black market. Plenty to finance their escape. Everett could have taken the car himself, but he didn't want to risk being seen. He wanted everyone to think he'd been abducted. Patterson could have taken it, but that also would have been high risk. If Patterson had been caught, his and Everett's room at the PEAK house would have been searched, and the whole scheme would have collapsed like a house of cards.

I thought about it some more. I supposed it could have gone down a hundred different ways. It was possible that Everett had simply handed over a set of keys to a professional car thief in exchange for a satchel full of cash. Or maybe he'd bartered with the airplane pilot. Maybe he'd offered the high-end convertible in exchange for a hop to Mexico. That would have been a pretty nice paycheck for any crooked flyboy, especially for only one day's work.

The case of Everett's missing BMW would probably remain unresolved, and considering everything else that had happened, I was okay with that.

But there was another automobile on my mind.

Everett had taken me hostage, and he'd planned on forcing me to drive him to the airstrip in Patterson's car. That obviously hadn't happened, and Everett obviously hadn't taken the car himself.

I knew this because I still had the key.

So there must have been a third person, and this person—whoever it was—had provided transportation for Everett to get away from the PEAK house before the cops came.

I reached into my pocket, pulled out the key and looked at it. There was a fancy little L embedded into the rubber grip, and there was a gold Lexus parked in the gravel lot behind the PEAK house.

I got out and walked over to the car and tried the key, just to be sure. It worked.

I walked back to the Caprice, sat and stared at the back of the house some more.

Thought some more.

And then it came to me.

I started the car and drove out to the highway and whipped into the first twenty-four-hour store I saw, a pharmacy just south of Woof-A-Burger. There was a payphone out front. I jammed some coins into it

and punched in the number for FBI Special Agent Richard Sinclair, and he answered on the first ring.

"This is Nicholas Colt," I said. "I just thought of something."

"What is it, Colt?"

He sounded sleepy. Understandable at four o'clock in the morning.

"I think Bradley Harbaugh was in on it," I said.

"Huh?"

"Everett's father. Not his biological father, but the man who raised him. He's an attorney."

"Okay. I know who Bradley Harbaugh is. But what makes you think —"

"Prenups," I said. "Prenuptial agreements. Do you know who Bradley's married to?"

I heard some papers rustling.

"I have her name here somewhere," Sinclair said.

"Jill Drake," I said. "A little over a hundred years ago, her great-great grandfather started a company called Drake Foods. When her mother died two years ago, Jill inherited a fortune. Some of the reports I've read estimate her net worth at over a hundred million dollars. With that kind of money on the line, I can almost guarantee you there was a prenuptial agreement when Jill and Bradley got hitched twenty-some years ago. Her family would have insisted on it. If things ever went wrong with the marriage—which things have a habit of doing—there was no way an in-law was going to walk away with a big fat share of the company."

"Okay. So?"

"So Jill filed for divorce a couple of months ago. August fifteenth, to be exact. If there's a pre-nup—which I'm sure there is—then Bradley is screwed. He won't get any part of that hundred million."

"He's an attorney. I'm sure he'll do okay on his own."

"Okay isn't the same as mega-rich," I said. "He was probably planning on retiring soon and sailing up and down the coast in a super-yacht or something. Now he'll be forced to keep working for a measly hundred grand a year, or whatever it is he makes, and he'll grow old in a one bedroom condo with a couple of cats and a big screen TV like the rest of us."

"So you think he orchestrated this whole thing for the twenty million?"

"I'm almost sure of it. Think about how complex the scheme was. Could two nineteen-year-old fraternity guys have put all that together? Would they even have known how? Would they have had the connections they needed to establish an offshore bank account? To get safely out of the country on an illegal flight? I don't think so. It's highly unlikely. But Bradley Harbaugh did have the connections. He's

a defense attorney. High profile. He deals with criminals on a daily basis. He was the only person in this whole tangled web with the savvy and the motivation to pull this thing off.”

“But I talked to him earlier,” Sinclair said. “He was at home.”

“Of course he was at home. He needed to be there to play the game while everyone still thought Everett had been kidnapped. He needed to go through the phone surveillance with you guys, and he needed to talk to the media and all that. His own little dog and pony show. But now that the money has been transferred, he can catch a flight and meet up with his son in Mexico. From there, they’ll go to the Philippines together. Or wherever. They might have changed that part by now.”

“It’s an interesting theory.”

“I’m not positive, but I’m pretty sure that’s the way it went down. It’s all pretty ingenious when you think about it. The money was supposed to have been split three ways, but now it’s just Everett and Bradley. Father and son. I’m sure they’re heartbroken that John Patterson won’t be joining them after all.”

“You might be on to something,” Sinclair said. “I’m going to put a team together, and we’ll make a trip over to the Harbaugh residence.”

“You better do it soon,” I said. “I doubt if he’ll be home much longer.”

After we hung up, I walked into the pharmacy and bought a universal phone charger and a bottle of headache tablets and a soda. I swallowed four of the pills, plugged my cell into the rental car’s cigarette lighter, and headed for Lake Barkley.

I called Laurie on the way, got voice mail. I told her to meet me at Kelly’s Pool Hall in Hallows Cove at two o’clock in the afternoon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

My Airstream was cleaner than it had been in years. The company I hired had done a great job. My laptop was ruined, and the tires on my Jimmy were still flat, but otherwise life was suddenly back to normal. As normal as it gets for me, anyway.

I took a shower and climbed into bed and slept for seven hours straight. When I woke up, I made a pot of coffee and walked outside and sat at the picnic table for a while. I'd already stopped wearing the sling for my arm.

Laurie had left a message on my phone. She said she would meet me at Kelly's at two, and that she had a surprise for me. A surprise! I couldn't wait.

There was also a message from Agent Sinclair. He said that Bradley Harbaugh had been arrested, and that I would most likely be called upon to give a deposition in the next couple of weeks. In other words, he wanted me to stay around town for a while. He said to give him a call first thing Monday morning.

It was Saturday, October 25. Everett's twentieth birthday. I hoped he was having a great time, wherever he was. He should have a great time on his birthday. Everyone should. Cake and all that. And he should enjoy his freedom while he could, because I doubted that it was going to last long. I had a feeling the FBI would catch up with him, eventually, once they bled some information out of his father. And I hoped they did catch up with him. Everett had conspired to steal twenty million dollars from Jill Drake-Harbaugh. His own mother. He deserved to be caught.

It all boiled down to greed, really. And the sad thing about it—the ironic thing—was that Everett would have inherited the money eventually anyway. But he couldn't wait. He had to have it now, and he had to get his mom back for keeping the big secret all these years, for not telling him that he'd been conceived in a sperm bank.

I imagined Bradley Harbaugh had played a huge part in fanning those emotional flames, knowing that Everett was his ticket to big time wealth. Bradley was the smooth talker, the con man, the wheeler dealer, the brains of the outfit. Everett had been taken for a ride, but he was a grown man, capable of making his own decisions, and he deserved to be punished for what he'd done, right along with his dad and John Patterson. I hoped the FBI would catch him. The sooner the better.

Actually, Everett probably wasn't having a very good time for his birthday, even with all that money at his disposal. He was probably in

panic mode by now, wondering why he hadn't heard from his father.

I sat there at the picnic table thinking about it all, sipping my coffee and enjoying the beautiful autumn day. I was about to go inside for a second cup when I saw Dylan Crawford climbing up the hill with a rod and reel in one hand and a cricket cage in the other. His new friend was walking beside him, the big yellow dog he'd named Bud. They finally made it up to my place, both of them panting a bit from the effort.

"Catch anything?" I said.

"Not even a bite."

I lit a cigarette.

"Your dog's looking better," I said.

"I'm trying to teach him how to catch a Frisbee."

"How's that going?"

"He'll catch it, but he won't bring it back to me. He just drops it on the ground."

"He'll learn," I said.

Dylan ran his fingers through Bud's golden fur. "Why don't you come on down and do some fishing with us?" he said.

"Can't. I have a date."

"With a girl?"

"Yes, with a girl. Anything wrong with that?"

"I guess not. All right, I'll see you later."

"See you, Dylan."

They turned around and started back down the hill.

A boy and a dog and a fishing pole, I thought.

What crisp clear October afternoons were made for.

I drank two more cups of coffee, and then went inside and took a shower and got dressed and headed on over to Kelly's. It's a pool hall, but they have a couple of televisions, and I knew it would be a good place to watch the game. Laurie was already at the bar sipping on a frozen margarita when I walked in.

I kissed her. "Good to see you," I said.

"You too. How did it go last night?"

"Long story."

"That's okay. I'm not going anywhere. I called in sick for tonight. So you can tell me all about it."

"You don't look sick," I said.

"I'm not. Trust me."

"Won't the manager be mad about having to cover for you?"

"He'll get over it," she said. "So why did you want me to meet you here?"

"I thought we could watch the game together."

"What game?" she said.

“Game six of the World Series.”

“Baseball?”

“Yes, baseball. It’s what crisp clear October afternoons were made for. Along with boys and dogs and fishing poles, of course.”

She laughed. “Okay. I’ll watch the game with you. You want a drink?”

“In a minute. Where’s the surprise you promised me?”

“At my place. You’ll just have to come on over later if you want to see it.”

“I guess I could do that,” I said. “You’re not going to give me a hint or anything?”

“Nope.”

We had some drinks and some food and watched baseball on TV, and I told Laurie about everything that had happened in Gainesville yesterday. She said my story was much more interesting than the game, but she didn’t know what she was talking about. The Marlins ended up winning, taking the trophy home for the second time in franchise history. My team won. They were the champions of the world!

Laurie didn’t drink nearly as much as I did, so she insisted that I leave the Caprice at Kelly’s. I agreed that it would be a good idea. She drove us to her apartment, and she made me close my eyes when she turned into the parking lot.

She braked to a stop.

“Can I open them now?” I said.

“Yes.”

I opened my eyes. Laurie had pulled alongside the spot where my Jimmy was parked. Through the passenger’s side window of her car, I could see that the tires weren’t flat anymore.

“You bought me new tires?” I said.

“Yes! Brand new ones. Aren’t they great?”

“This is the nicest present anyone has ever given to me. I think I’m going to cry.”

But I didn’t. I kissed her and hugged her and kissed her some more until some lady in a Kia started honking her horn to get by. Laurie found a parking place, and we walked on up to her apartment.

She poured me a beer and got herself one, and we sat on the couch with Edgar the cat between us.

“You’ve had a rough time the past few days, haven’t you?” she said.

“You could say that.”

“Anyway, it’ll make a great story for your grandkids someday.”

“I guess so. But the story’s really not about me.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s about a young lady named Stephanie Vowels who lost her life

because some people got greedy.”

“And those people are going to pay for their crimes, largely because of your actions. I disagree that it’s not about you, Nicholas Colt. I think it’s very much about you, about your courage and determination, your loyalty and intelligence. You’re a star, and I think this is only the beginning.”

I leaned over and kissed her. One thing led to another, and we ended up tearing each other’s clothes off again on the way to the bedroom. We made love, and then we talked. I told her some more of my deepest darkest secrets, and she told me some of hers.

We rested for a while, and then we went at it again. And again. She held me tight and I told her that I loved her, and we sauced the white Fiesta like it had never been sauced before.

Thanks so much for reading COLT!

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DEL CHIVO

MONDAY, 2:12 P.M. COLOMBIA TIME

Lunch at the Mendoza mansion had been spectacular, possibly one of the top five meals of Sergio Del Chivo's life. Foie gras, veal, octopus, lobster. More fresh fruits and vegetables than Del Chivo had ever seen on one table anywhere. And the chocolate! Alejandro Mendoza, leader of the South American drug cartel known as *Los Bastardos Deseables*, knew how to live, and Del Chivo wanted to live that way, too. And he would, someday.

He vowed that he would.

After lunch, Señor Mendoza invited Sergio into his private office. The room smelled of leather and tobacco and wood polish, the kind made from citrus oils. Mendoza was perched on a giant leather throne behind a very large cherry desk, and Del Chivo sat across from him in a pleated wing chair. There were no windows. The mahogany paneling seemed to insulate the room from the rest of the world, although Del Chivo knew that the two men with automatic rifles standing directly outside the door could hear everything being said.

"You're probably wondering why I asked you here today." Mendoza had a deep, rich voice, like a Latin James Earl Jones.

"It is a great honor, señor. And a privilege. Thank you. Thank you very much."

"Your English is excellent, by the way."

"Thank you."

Mendoza leaned forward and selected a cigar from the box on his desk. He rolled it in his thick fingers. "You've expressed interest in moving up in the organization, and I think it's time. You've shown initiative, and loyalty, and a strong work ethic. I need someone in San Salvador. I would like for you to be my lieutenant there."

"I don't know what to say, señor. This is more than I ever could have hoped for. I come from El Salvador, but I've been here in Colombia for many years, and I love it. Of course I would be very happy to take this position."

"It comes with a price. Every time I promote one of my men, there is a..." Mendoza gave the cigar a long sniff. "A rite of passage. It won't be easy, but the reward will be great. I have confidence that you can achieve this task, that you will pass my little test with flying colors."

"Whatever it is you ask of me, I will do my best, señor."

"That's exactly the right attitude, Sergio. This is why you were picked for promotion. I see great things in your future."

"Thank you, señor. Now what is it that I can do for you?"

Mendoza bit the end of the cigar and spit it into the cuspidor next to his desk. Then he removed a gold lighter from his jacket pocket and began to heat the other end.

"Smoke, Sergio?"

"No thank you, señor."

"A drink? I have an excellent Calvados."

"You have worked hard to become a rich and powerful man, Señor Mendoza. You have earned the right to smoke and drink. I have not, yet."

Mendoza seemed pleased by the answer. He sucked on the cigar and got it going, blowing out a long stream of fragrant smoke.

"Have you ever been to the United States, Sergio?"

Sergio was careful to keep his face neutral, but the memory washed over him.

Los Estados Unidos.

The mere mention of that horrible place made Del Chivo's stomach turn. Sixteen years ago, his family had been tortured and killed by the Treasury Police in El Salvador, an organization that existed largely because of funds and weapons distributed by the Central Intelligence Agency. In essence, the United States had murdered Sergio's mother, and his father, and his sister. Sergio had been a teenager at the time, and he could still hear his father's screams as the ruthless policemen castrated him with a butcher knife.

"No," Del Chivo said. "I have never been there."

Mendoza set his cigar on an X shaped gold stand next to his phone, and poured himself a snifter of Boulard VSOP.

"I am going to send you to the city of Chicago. You have heard of this place?"

"I have."

"If you wish to be promoted to my lieutenant in El Salvador, you must first kill five American citizens, and at least one of them must be a police officer. You must kill them, and then bring their picture ID cards back to me for verification."

Del Chivo sat back in his chair. He had killed men before, but only in self-defense. Why would Señor Mendoza ask him to do this? Five random killings in a strange country. It was a tall order.

"I know you are wondering why I would ask this of you." Mendoza picked up his cigar again. "You are too respectful to ask, but I will tell you anyway. I need to know that your loyalty extends beyond merely following orders, Sergio. I need to know that you would risk everything for me. Your freedom, and even your life. And, even though *Los Bastardos Deseables* earns a great deal of money from the sales of our product there, I need to know that you hate the United States of America as much as I do."

Sergio leaned forward and met Mendoza's heavy stare.

"My feelings for the United States go beyond hate," he said, his tone measured. "Tell me where to go, and what to do, and I will do it, Señor Mendoza. I will do it with great pleasure."

Mendoza smiled. "That's what I wanted to hear. Now, just one more thing, and we will go play in the pool with the lovely señoritas."

"You are a most gracious host, señor. I am overwhelmed by your hospitality."

There was an electronic console built into Mendoza's desk. He pushed a button, and the largest plasma television Sergio had ever seen slowly descended from a recess in the ceiling. The screen came to life, and the video started with a close-up of a man's face.

"His name is Jaso," Mendoza said. "Or should I say his name *was* Jaso."

Beads of sweat studded Jaso's forehead. His upper lip was curled in a snarl, his eyes hidden behind a black bandana. As the camera slowly boomed out to a wider angle, Sergio could see that Jaso was strapped to a reclining chair, the type you might see in a dentist's office.

Jaso's arms and legs were chained to the chair, and more chains were wrapped around his chest and neck. Maybe he had struggled to get free before the video started, but he sat completely still now.

Resigned to his fate, Sergio thought.

A man wearing a long white smock and a black leather mask entered the scene carrying a small wooden box in one hand and a steaming towel in the other. He coiled the towel over Jaso's face, and then he opened the box, revealing a very fancy straight razor nesting on a cushion of velvet. He lifted the razor from the box and opened it, the shiny steel blade twinkling under the bright studio lights.

The barber started humming a song as he stroked the razor across the leather strop attached to the chair. Sergio didn't recognize the tune, but it was a happy little number, something cheerful, something you might whistle on the way to a picnic. The barber obviously enjoyed his work.

"Time for your shave," he said.

"Please, señor! Don't do this! You don't have to do this!"

The barber didn't say anything. He approached Jaso with the razor, and then the screen paused.

"Would you like to see the rest of the video?" Mendoza asked.

Sergio kept his face blank. "If you wish me to."

Mendoza had a sip of apple brandy. "You know, I spent some time in Japan. With some important men there. Powerful men, who do the things we do here. Honor is very big in that country. If they screw up, they call it *kao o tsubusu*. *Losing face*."

Mendoza pressed the pause button again. The scene continued.

It was truly horrible.

After most of Jaso's features had been cut away, the barber finally slashed his throat.

"Jaso was my lieutenant in El Salvador. He is the man you'll be replacing, if you're successful in the United States. He failed me. I do not tolerate failure in my organization. That is why he lost face."

"I understand," Sergio said.

"Are you repulsed?"

Sergio shook his head.

"Good. Because I want you to take more than just the ID from the Americans you kill." Mendoza leaned forward and smiled. "I also want you to take their faces. Can you do that?"

Sergio met his boss's eyes. He nodded.

Mendoza sat back and took a long drag on his cigar, the ash glowing orange. "Good," he said. "You leave for Chicago tonight."

DANIELS

THURSDAY, 10:43 P.M. CST

Under the harsh glare of the Chicago Police Department's portable flood lights, residue from thousands of exhaust pipes and leaky engines rose from the alley's pitted asphalt and coated the puddle of blood with a colorful, greasy film. At the center of the puddle lay a Caucasian male, mid-forties, average height and weight, well-dressed, very dead.

I had checked his pockets for ID, but the killer, or someone who came upon the body after the killer, had taken his wallet.

The deceased had money. Fifty dollar haircut, tailored suit, Ralph Lauren tie and Gucci loafers. Robbery was the obvious motive. Why a rich guy parked in an alley wasn't as obvious.

Most of the blood seemed to have gushed from a single wound on his left inner thigh. Femoral artery. But there was also considerable blood around his head, shoulders and chest.

His face had been flayed off.

I assumed that had been after he died, because there were no defensive wounds on his hands. Not the normal MO of a thief.

It had probably been done with a straight razor or a box cutter, the preferred tools of street criminals who didn't want to get popped holding a handgun or a switchblade.

Bad guys were like bacteria. Adaptable.

The latest trend was hornet spray. A thug would buy a can at the grocery store and then threaten to shoot it into his victim's eyes if he or she didn't hand over the money. I wondered what kind of mind it took to even come up with something like that. Twenty-some years on the job, over ten of those in the Violent Crimes Unit, had taught me a few things, but keeping up with crooks often seemed like an exercise in futility. Like pushing a boulder uphill just to watch it roll back down again.

The body was discovered forty minutes ago. Patrol car, who'd pulled up to ticket the silver Mercedes we were parked behind in the alley. Probably the vic's car. Keys still in ignition, but the car wasn't running. Registered to William Shipman, 43 years of age, a resident of Streeterville.

I sat in my 1989 Chevy Nova and jotted down some notes for my preliminary report while Sergeant Herb Benedict, my partner, complained about the weather.

"This is ridiculous," he said. "March third, and it's ten freaking degrees outside. And dropping as we speak. Global warming my ass."

"You should send a terse letter to Al Gore, telling him he's full of shit."

Herb rubbed his shoulders and shivered. "Or I could move to Florida."

"Hurricanes."

"California."

"Earthquakes."

"Alabama"

"Southerners," I said.

"What's wrong with southerners?"

"They don't like city slickers like you."

"You know the National Shrimp Festival is in Alabama," Herb said.

"Alabama also has hurricanes."

"Is there any place nice to live?"

"No," I said. "It sucks everywhere."

Herb reached over and picked up my badge and police ID card from the center console.

"Lieutenant Jacqueline Daniels," he said. "*Lieutenant*. That means you make more money than me. Seems like you could afford a car with heat that works."

"This car is a classic. They don't make them like this anymore."

"For a reason. It's a piece of garbage."

"When you write Al Gore, complain about my car, too."

Herb's salt-and-pepper mustache turned downward. "Maybe it isn't my position to judge..."

"Here we go."

"...but maybe fixing the heat in this rust bucket is more important than buying designer clothing all the time."

Today I wore a Burberry Brit leather trench over an Armani wool pantsuit. Gucci scarf, pointy-toe ankle boots by Pour la Victoire. There were a pair of long johns from Walmart under the slacks, but nobody needed to know that.

"I dress well to feel good about myself," I said.

"You know what else would make you feel good about yourself? A car made in this decade."

I didn't feel like talking about it. I switched on the radio, dialed in a station that played oldies.

Frankie Avalon was singing a song called "Gingerbread."

I changed the station.

"Why don't you walk inside and get us a cup of coffee?" I said, trying to concentrate on my notes.

Benedict must have sensed the change in my mood. He knew I wasn't a fan of gingerbread.

"Did you know Frankie Avalon started out as a tightrope walker?"

he asked.

"I didn't know that."

"Yeah, and he did it without Annette!"

"Coffee, Herb. Please."

The alley we were parked in was alongside a CigsMart, a small convenience shop catering to your nicotine and sugar addictions twenty-four hours a day. The ashtray in the Benz was well-used. That could have explained why it had stopped here. But why not park in the lot? Why the alley?

Sergeant Benedict climbed out of my Nova, ducked under a strip of yellow tape, and waddled to the front door. Despite all the diets he'd been on recently, he seemed to have gained some weight. The heavy coat he was wearing might have had something to do with it, but in the office the other day I'd noticed his chin had gone from a double to a triple. He had blood pressure issues, and I figured it was only a matter of time until he started taking insulin with his morning donut. Herb was my partner, but he was also my friend. I wanted him to stay healthy and live to a ripe old age.

On the east side of the alley, in front of a dilapidated garage at the edge of someone's backyard, three men huddled and stared at the orange flames rising from a fifty-five gallon steel drum. The one in the middle appeared to be Hispanic, the other two African American. They each wore a skull cap—one brown, one green, and one black with an orange C on it. I could hear them talking and laughing over my car radio. They passed a jug of wine around, didn't seem impressed that a fresh corpse lay only twenty feet away, or that there were cops everywhere. Probably used to it. That's the kind of neighborhood it was.

I guessed the black guys to be in their late-fifties or early-sixties, although it's hard to judge with winos. Excessive alcohol tends to accelerate the aging process. It's like pressing the fast-forward button on this movie of the week we commonly call *Life*. The third man, the one in the middle, was much younger. Mid-thirties, I guessed, and I doubted he'd been on the street for very long. He just didn't have the look.

I decided to walk over there and have a word with them. Talking to drunks is usually a dead end, but it was worth a try. As I approached, the one on my left—the one wearing the brown beanie—said, "Hey, baby. Looking good tonight."

I held my star up. "Lieutenant Jacqueline Daniels," I said. "CPD."

He slapped his hand against his cheek, and his mouth went from a sly smirk to a surprised O. Exaggerated expression, like a cartoon.

"A police woman!" he said.

"Yeah, and a fine one," Black Cap said. "Those are nice duds."

"Thanks."

"But your car is a real piece of shit."

I was able to ignore that jibe because I'm tough. "I need to know what happened in the alley tonight."

"Guy got killed," Black Cap said.

"No kidding. And I suppose none of you guys saw anything, right?"

"We ain't been here long. All these damn flashing blue lights is what brought us out in the first place."

It was like a party to them. They were enjoying the show.

I handed Black Cap a business card.

"Give me a call if you hear anything," I said.

"Can I give you a call if I *don't* hear anything?"

"Probably not a good idea."

I turned to walk away, but one of them called back to me. "Hey, lady cop."

I stopped.

"Is there some sort of reward, or something, for information?"

It was the younger Latino in the green cap. His accent was Hispanic, but didn't sound Mexican or Puerto Rican. I guessed South America.

"There might be," I said. "Did you see something?"

His dark eyes looked me over, head to toe. "Give me your card. Maybe I call you if I remember."

Was he hiding something? Greedy for a reward? Scared to talk? Playing some sort of game? High? None of the above?

I gave him a business card and waited.

He stared at me, saying nothing.

"Do you hang around here?" I asked.

"Sometimes."

"Did you see the murder?"

A shrug.

"Did you see who might have killed him?"

Another shrug.

His two buddies laughed. I could have arrested all three of them for public intoxication and an open liquor container, but why? On very cold days, some homeless people would intentionally provoke cops to get a warm bed and a free meal for the night. If that as their intent, it wasn't worth my time, or the paperwork.

"Call if you remember anything," I repeated.

When I turned to go I almost got speared in the gut by my partner. Herb was carrying a plastic grocery bag in one hand and a long fork in the other, the kind you use to turn steaks on a barbecue grill.

"Stick around," he said. "I'm going to roast some marshmallows."

"Marshmallows?"

"Yeah, I'm starving. I bought some graham crackers and chocolate

bars too. We can have s'mores."

I shook my head and walked back to the Nova, where I found two large cups of coffee in the drink holders between the seats. I peeled the lid off one, took a sip, and watched Herb play summer camp with the alcoholics. A couple of minutes later, the uniform I'd spoken to earlier tapped on my window. Her nametag said S. Burwig.

"Got info on the car's owner," she said. "DMV and NCIC."

She handed me a printout of his driver's license and info. Hard to tell if the photo matched, considering our vic no longer had a face, but everything else seemed to fit. No priors, no record, no warrants.

"Thanks," I said.

"I also called 411," she said. "A hunch. Rich guy, might be listed."

It was good thinking. "And?"

"There's a Dr. William Shipman in the phone directory. Office is on Addison, a few blocks east."

"Did you call them?"

"Yes. The answering service picked up, and they paged the person on call, a PA named Nancy Stearns. She told me Dr. Shipman left with some colleagues a few hours ago. He drives a silver Mercedes."

"Good work."

"So how'd he end up in the alley?"

I was thinking the same thing. "Could be he stopped for some smokes, lot was full. Figured he'd be in and out real quick. Or someone lured him into the alley somehow."

"Drugs?" Burwig asked.

I couldn't picture a rich doctor doing a dope deal in an alley.

"Someone could have flagged him over, yelling for help," I said. "A doctor would respond, right? Or..."

"Or someone in the car with him made him pull into the alley," Burwig said, finishing my thought.

"Someone angry enough to cut off the doctor's face. Then take his wallet and make it look like a robbery. But why not take the car? Or the expensive shoes? You were first on scene, right?"

"Yeah."

"Did you turn his car off?"

"No. It was already off."

This was looking less and less like a robbery and more and more like premeditated murder.

"How long before the ME shows up?"

"He's going to be a while. Said it's been a busy night."

"Aren't they all?"

Burwig nodded, turned and walked away.

A few minutes later, Sergeant Benedict opened the passenger's side door and climbed in, two blackened marshmallows dangling from the

end of his barbecue fork.

"These are going to be heavenly" he said. "You like s'mores, right?"

"I'll pass. Do you think he had car trouble?"

"Who?"

"The owner of the Benz. I just noticed his hood isn't closed all the way. Maybe he stopped in the alley to check his engine."

"Alley is dark," Herb said. "Parking lot is lit up. Why not pull into the parking lot?"

Good point. I started my car.

"Where are we going?"

"Home," I said.

"I thought you wanted to wait for the Medical Examiner."

"We can stop by their office in the morning. I got probable ID on the victim, and it's pretty obvious how he died."

"Next of kin?"

"Not going to happen tonight. Need the M.E. to sign off, and I'm not going to knock on someone's door at two a.m. with a maybe. We'll handle it first thing tomorrow."

I put the car in gear, steered toward the parking lot's exit while Herb ferreted through his plastic grocery bag.

"Stop the car, Jack!"

I stopped the car. Herb was visibly distraught.

"What is it?" I said.

"Those guys stole my crackers."

"The winos?"

"Yeah."

I looked toward the steel drum. The flames had died down, and the three men were gone.

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh, well," I said. "Live and learn."

"Bullshit. Drive around the neighborhood for a minute. I'm going to find those bastards, and I'm going to arrest their sorry asses."

"What are you going to charge them with?" I asked. "Graham theft?"

I laughed again, eased into the late night traffic on West Addison Street. Herb was still pouting about the crackers when I dropped him at his door.

COLT
FRIDAY, 8:56 A.M. EST

People generally look after their own best interests. It's a flaw in the human species, a glitch. It starts the day you're born, and it ends the day you die. It's the reason emotions like jealousy exist.

Greed.

Envy.

Hatred.

It's the reason wars are fought.

If you ever find someone who truly and consistently cares about what happens to you, someone who loves you unconditionally, someone who would take a bullet for you without giving it a second thought, then you need to cling to that person like paint on a wall. It's very unlikely you'll ever run across anyone like that again.

Fifteen and a half years ago, I crawled from the wreckage of a chartered jet seconds before everyone who mattered to me went up in a ball of flames. My wife Susan, our baby daughter Harmony, my band Colt .45, everyone. I was the sole survivor, and there was nothing I could do to save them.

Susan was the love of my life, my soul mate. There would never be another, I'd thought at the time. But was it possible for a guy like me to have gotten lucky twice? And did I even have what it took to fully commit to a woman again?

It's the kind of thing you think about when you wake up too early and stare at the ceiling for a couple of hours.

I reached over to the bedside table and shut my cell phone's alarm off. Edgar, my girlfriend's big furry gray cat, had been lying there on the table blinking at me lazily, nonchalantly, but the abrupt trill startled him. He jumped down and darted out the bedroom door.

"Scaredy cat," I said, talking to myself as much as to the animal.

"Five more minutes," Laurie said.

"I thought you wanted to get up at nine."

"Five more minutes."

I grabbed the phone, climbed out of bed, started toward the kitchen to make a pot of coffee and open a can of 9 Lives.

And that's when the call came.

"This is Colt," I said.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Female. Older. Smoker. Possibly hard of hearing.

"I'm here," I said.

"Is this Nicholas Colt, the private investigator?"

"Allegedly."

She started coughing into my ear, finally got it under control and said, "My name's Doris Green. I tried the number you have listed in the phone book all day yesterday, but I kept getting an answering machine. I was just lucky to have—"

"Sorry," I said. "I've been away from the office for a few days."

The *office* was a 1964 Airstream Safari travel trailer parked on lot twenty-seven at Joe's Fish Camp in Hallows Cove, Florida. Laurie lived in Jacksonville, thirty miles northeast of there, and I'd been staying at her apartment more and more over the past few months. We were living together, technically, although the camper on Lake Barkley was still a nice place to have.

"I have a very serious problem," Doris Green said. "I was wondering if you might be able to help me."

"I might be able to. What's your problem?"

Emphysema? Chronic bronchitis? Lung cancer?

"I'd rather not discuss it over the phone," she said. "Would it be possible for us to meet somewhere in person?"

"Sure. But could you just give me a general idea of what you're talking about?"

"I'm talking about murder," she said.

This concludes the sample chapters. If you would like to finish the entire novel, [LADY 52](#) is now available for purchase.

Thanks again, and happy reading!
Jude

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Table of Contents

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Excerpt: Lady 52